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THE
TOWER OF TADDEO

BY
OUIDA

AUTHOR OF 'UNDER TWO FLAGS,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. II.



LONDON
WILLIAM HEINEMANN

1892

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THE TOWER OF TADDEO

CHAPTER VI.

OF her father's learning and nobility of character Beldia was passionately reverent and proud ; but to certain weaknesses in him she could not be wholly blind. When the new-comer from the north timidly hinted to her his perception that she had little pleasure in seeing him return frequently to the library, she answered him with honesty and candour.

‘ It is true,’ she replied, ‘ that I cannot

fail to perceive that my father trusts too much and gives too much ; and many young men make him talk that they may carry off the riches of his intellect and learning. For truly, sir,' she added proudly, 'the mere crumbs from my father's stores would be more rich than the fullest granaries of many.'

'I understand,' said the Brescian ; 'I know now what it is that you think. But God is my witness that I had none such evil designs. I honour your father, and gain wisdom from all he says, indeed ; but I assure you I have not the faintest thoughts of making use of what he tells me in my own interests, except in the sense that all must benefit who hear a learned scholar.'

Beldia felt that she might have been ungenerous and unjust.

‘I beg your pardon for harbouring such a doubt,’ she said more gently. ‘Young men do too often make my father a stepping-stone to their own honour; and when they have mounted where they wished, forget the means by which they rose.’

‘I fear that ingratitude is too common in human nature,’ said the Lombard, ‘and from whosoever gives much, much is taken, and thanklessly. Ser Checchi should go on his ways and not attend to importunity.’

‘My father is most generous,’ said Beldia, ‘with the food of the mind as well as the nourishment of the body.’

‘May it be rendered to him!’ the

Brescian answered ; but it was rather the utterance of a desire than of a belief, for he had seen enough of the world to know that such liberality as Francesco Ardiglione's ruins the man who practises it more than all selfish indulgence would ever do.

He had the quick apprehension of the artistic temperament, and he could well imagine the difficulties and conflicting duties by which she was beset in her endeavour to approve her father in all he did, yet fill up the vacuum which he left in their finances. She had a serene and clear intelligence, fit for Athene's self ; but Athene herself could not have filled up a bottomless vase.

He divined something of the anxieties and ineffectual efforts of the scholar's

daughter, and it stimulated the admiration which he felt for her, and gave his respect for her the softer and warmer glow of pity. From the day when she had candidly confessed to him her suspicions of his motives such doubts had been dissipated; and she and he had become gradually companions and friends.

He was wholly unlike the young men whom she had seen come to the tower, who were only of two classes: the wild, dissipated comrades of Cirillo, or the young doctrinaires and journalists who frequented the library. He was of a higher type than either; the blood of a once martial and generous race ran in his veins; and though he was poor and humble in position, he had the temper and the instincts of a gentleman, and

belonged to a different order to the finical and varnished gentlemanhood of Pampilio Querci and his fellows.

There were a candour, simplicity, and kindliness about him which endeared him quickly to old people and to young; and he made himself at home in the tower of Taddeo without the slightest presumption or intrusiveness. It soon became quite natural in her sight that he should accompany her father in his evening rambles through the by-streets; assist in dusting and arranging the interminable volumes which were piled one on another on the floors; and even venture upstairs on to the roof at sunset to see what he could do in trimming and watering the herbs and flowers.

Little by little he had become a com-

rade and a companion to her, without ever seeming to presume on the privileges. Ser Checchi found in him a listener after his own heart, and Beldia, though she was by nature reserved and slow to give her regard to strangers, found much that was attractive and akin to her in this frank-eyed and gentlemanly scholar from the north.

She was a woman who had thought little of men as lovers ; like many women who have been accustomed to male companionship and intellectual commerce, her life was too full and too various to leave her leisure for the amorous fancies which lead the lighter brains of the unoccupied and more frivolous so many a useless dance after the marsh-lights of imaginary passions. When men had

asked her hand, as they had done some few times, she had thanked them gravely for the token of their esteem, and declined to leave her father, or entertain any suit, however favoured by him.

But she did not think that because a man watered her carnations, or classified the pamphlets of the book-rooms, he must of necessity fall at her feet on the morrow ; and the intercourse between her and the Lombard artist, when the ice of her reserve had once been broken, was frank and friendly, as it might have been between two youths of similar tastes and studies. Only in his own heart he speedily began to sigh for warmer things, for freer speech.

Ser Checchi, indeed, had taken him on trust, and had made him welcome to

his house, as Erasmus or as Boethius might have done, simply on the strength of mutual tastes and studies, and in the confidence engendered by mutual simplicity and candour. But from being welcome as a reader of old books in a library, to being welcome as a suitor to a woman's hand from her family, there is a wide difference of which Odisio was keenly sensible.

‘How my mother would admire and welcome her!’ he thought, when he saw her diligently bending over the catalogues and ledgers, so content and tranquil in what would have been to any other woman of her age an existence dull and laborious. It was not his mother's fault that he had not wherewithal to offer Ser Checchi's

daughter a more cheerful and a happier life.

His mother had given him a fine education, and had denied herself of all luxuries to enable him to study and to travel. It was his own fault, and no one else's, that he had let the best years of his youth drift away in a Bohemian's wandering, and his talents and knowledge rust unused. With far fewer opportunities, and far less intelligence than he had been blessed with, men had made themselves a place and a name before their thirtieth year. He had enjoyed his liberty, and now he paid its cost. And often, as he walked back at night to his temporary lodging, he bitterly lamented the carelessness with which he had let so many years go by

without making for himself such a place in life as would have enabled him to become Beldia's suitor. He had all the humility and timidity which accompany a genuine passion ; and, though she was only the daughter of the bookseller of the tower in San Jacopo, she was to him as a queen clothed in raiment of light.

He was poor ; he had only had seventy francs in his purse when he had entered the city, and of that he had spent thirty in the purchase of the plates of Palladio, and the other designs and volumes. He had to work for his bread, but this did not affright him ; he was a man of courage and energy, and his wants were few ; the need of money hurt him most when he could not aid

others. He was generous by temper, and came of what had been a lavish and magnificent race in other days.

When he could make enough to live simply himself, and send some little presents to his mother of fine coffee, or wine, or fruits, or a little piece of old lace, he was quite content. The future could take care of itself, he had always thought: he had no one dependent on him.

But when he looked back over the years which had fled since he had left the Paduan University, and realized that, had he chosen, he might have so employed them as to have had a fixed home and a fair income to offer to Beldia Ardiglione, he was wroth with himself for the want of stability and of

application which had left him thus penniless in the flower of his age.

He was like one of those errant students of the Middle Ages, who roamed over Europe with nothing but a staff and a satchel, welcome everywhere to scholars for sake of their facile wit and well-stored brain. But the times in which he was born were no longer those in which this picturesque, wandering, aimless life was judged wise and praiseworthy; and there were no longer monastery doors open to such students, nor ducal courts like those of the Can Grande and Lionello d'Este, where fine Latin and a love of the Humanities were passport enough to board and lodging. Had he knocked now at any great man's gates with no

warrant but his portfolio of designs and his classical knowledge, he would have been consigned to the police or handed quickly over to the mercies of a mendicant society. Although he had fallen on evil, niggardly, and suspicious days, he had, however, always found life pleasant and easy, until now that he had seen the serene-eyed maiden of the tower of Taddeo. Since then it seemed to him that at his years he ought to have secured some sounder basis for subsistence, some surer means whereby to be able to maintain himself and others. What could he look like to her and to her father, except a careless ne'er-do-well and vagabond ?

They might see that he had talent, and believe that he had honour, but he

was a man who, at thirty years old, had neither place nor income.

It was now warm June weather ; not the season in which strangers willingly stay in the city, and he, Lombard-born, was used to spend his summers where winds were cool, on high chestnut-wooded hills, within sight of snow-clad mountains. Yet he now remained in his attic by the fountain of San Jacopo, finding excuse enough in his architectural studies, and even being so fortunate as to obtain momentary employment in making mechanical drawings for an architect in the town, who chanced to be a friend of that Milanese artist under whom he had studied seven years earlier.

Odisio had a grace and candour in his manner which attracted people, and, in

his work, an exactitude and zeal which confirmed the sympathy his manner aroused. He had practical ability, as well as imagination and invention. Something of the fire and of the emotion were in him in his attitude towards his art which made the men of the Middle Ages call the builder in stone *magister in vive lapide*. These feelings had indeed no field for practical expression, but they were evident in the depth and ardour of his gaze, as he looked on great architecture or great sculpture, in the freedom and fancy of his sketches of imaginary buildings, and in the torture which he suffered when he saw the mighty walls and noble arches of a past age going down under the dust of the leveller's pickaxes and

the shovels of the destroyers, as may be seen in this age over all Italy.

His reverence for the past formed a common bond between him and Ser Checchi; and the latter said approvingly that it was a good sight to see a young man so unlike his own generation and so full of respect for those who had gone before him.

The spirit of the past had entered into him in his studious boyhood, passed amongst the old streets and ancient palaces of Brescia and Bergamo, and some regret also for that time when his forefathers had hung up their shields amongst the knights and lords upon the frescoed walls of the Broletto.

‘What a ninny!’ said Pampilio Querci, as, going one morning to his

office, he saw the Lombard gazing for many moments in rapt admiration of Giotto's Campanile, with the soft and manifold hues on its marbles, like those of the pigeons which flew around it, and the morning light shed on it so clear, so cool, so luminous, that the building seemed scarcely more touched and made by the hand of man than were the clouds which floated in the sapphire sky.

Pampilio Querci admired nothing except the smoke of the dirty tramway car in which he went out to Sesto or Campi on feast days to shoot song-birds in the hedges; and the stuccoed box which he was pleased to call a house, where he slept every night amongst iron rails, pollarded acacias, a bran-

new jute factory, and an acre or two of hoarding covered with posters and lithographed advertisements of new soaps and cheap furniture. When the young attorney went to sleep amongst those surroundings, he felt indeed that his head was pillowed on progress.

‘ You look at the bell-tower? It is most inconveniently placed, it sorely impedes traffic,’ he said with polite disdain to the Brescian as he passed beside him.

The Brescian glanced down on him with a wondering disdain of another kind.

‘ Look? Ay, indeed!’ he cried; ‘ the American who took his hat off to it the other day was worthier of it than the

Florentines who brush by it without a benediction.'

'You are an enthusiast,' said Querci, with the tips of his thin curled lips, and a little frigid, cynical, pitying smile.

'Thank Heaven! yes, when I see what is worthy of enthusiasm.'

'Ah,' said the young lawyer with bland contempt; 'the American might take his hat off here to the campanile. In his own country he would soon change it into a grain-elevator!'

Then he gave a little twirl of his slim cane and of his small moustache, and went on to his office, where he sat down amongst his law books and law papers, and wrote a clever archæological article for a learned society, based on

matter which he had gleaned from the too eloquent tongue of Ser Checchi.

The Brescian looked after him with boundless scorn.

‘How would his wind last on the slope of Monte Genneroso?’ he thought grimly; ‘or swimming from shore to shore on the Garda waters?’

He felt that he should extremely like to have the spruce, slender, self-satisfied lawyer out with him in rough weather on one of those snow-filled passes or wind-swept lakes, on which he himself was as much at home as a chamois on the one or a trout in the other. He had often seen Querci at the tower, and knew, although he had never heard her say so, that Beldia disliked him; and he had a shrewd instinct also that he

had a rival in the pert attorney, and felt, with a furious impotence to retrace his steps, that he might, had he chosen, have already occupied a higher position than the lawyer owned.

His face grew hot with shame when he thought that, if he even disclosed to her the admiration with which he regarded her, he would only appear to her, and to her father, as a mercenary seeker of a home and of a dower. Ser Checchi seemed a man altogether beyond and above his own hand-to-mouth existence, and Beldia also herself daunted him and kept him at a distance.

She was kind, but kindness was her nature. She was gentle, but that also was natural to her. She smiled at him, but she smiled in the same way when

she chided the boy Poldo for going upstairs with dusty boots, or caressed the woolly white curls of her dog, or mixed a glass of syrup and water for the old priest, Don Gervasio.

The serenity and seriousness of her manner, so unlike the excitability of Italian women, and that dignity which he had noted in her on the first day that he had seen her in the market-place, intensified his admiration of her, but repressed all expression of it. Her mind and heart and time appeared so entirely and so well filled that it would have seemed to him the most preposterous presumption to think that there could be any place in them for him, or for any ordinary human passions.

‘ You have lived under the wings of the amorini until you scarcely belong to earth,’ he said to her one evening when she stood on the flat roof of the tower amongst her herbs and flowers, whilst the sky above was all in a roseate glow, warm and fair as the roses of May.

Beldia, who had her watering-pot in her hand and her garden-scissors at her girdle, laughed a little as she stooped over her carnations.

‘ No one was ever more earthly,’ she made answer. ‘ Surely you must have seen—I am the busiest of housewives. I have hardly ever a moment to look up yonder. And yet all the whole world should pause to adore *that*.’

She straightened her back and looked upward as she spoke at that vault of

azure light, flushed with clouds like rose-leaves, which was above their heads, above the whole city, the mountains, the plain, the river, in a glory of transfigured radiance, in which the stars and a crescent moon of silver were shining.

She raised her left hand above her head, pointing to the zenith. On her face shone reflected the luminance from the skies ; on that high place, with the sound of the streets far below them, and nothing near except the belfries dark against the light, and the black wings of whirling swallows and circling bats, she might have been Beatrice or Laura, and the world been young beneath her feet.

She forgot the stranger beside her.

She was lost in the beauty at which she gazed. Church bells were chiming, deep and low, from the towers and spires near. No other sound reached them there. The soft crimson of the zenith glowed richer and warmer as the azure darkened, and the planets grew larger, and more stars shone out from the tremulous blue.

And the Lombard thought :

‘ What could be the miserable, egotistical love of a man to a woman who feels the whole heart of nature throb in unison with hers as she does ? ’

It seemed to him that she was as far away from him as the crescent moon which shone amidst the rose and gold of the horizon.

Yet she wore a rough linen apron

tied over her cotton gown, and had a common watering-can in her hand, and had been a moment before solely intent on tying up her carnations and brushing the ants off her picotees.

She stood long, gazing up at that evening splendour stretched above the city, and the valley, and the amethyst ring of the mountains. She had forgotten that she was not alone. A pigeon, coming home to roost, flew down on her shoulder, and pecked with loving familiarity at her ear.

It startled her, and brought her thoughts to earth.

As she turned to caress the bird, she saw the gaze of Odisio Fontano fixed upon her as hers had been upon the skies,

The warmth from the heavens made his face seem full of light, and his eyes revealed what his lips never ventured to speak. With an embarrassment wholly novel to her, she put down the pigeon from her shoulder and began to water her plants again, whilst the cadence of the bells rocked drowsily through the air, and the roseate vault of the evening bent like a benediction over the city.

CHAPTER VII.

THE following day Ser Checchi was busied in his book-room. The accumulation of dust has few terrors for scholars, and the derangement and disturbance of the books have manifold terrors for them. Nevertheless, having drops of Frisian blood in him through his maternal ancestress, he loved cleanliness, and as he abhorred to see his volumes touched even by Beldia, he was wont at times to clean his shelves himself from cobweb and that fine powder-like sand which

was blown up from the streets and the bed of the river.

This morning he was thus engaged, standing on a pair of library steps, and using a hand-brush made of cocks' feathers. He was at the same time partially re-arranging the contents of the shelves, and was so engrossed in his occupation that he did not hear Odisio enter, and the respectful salutation of the new-comer took him by surprise.

‘Sit down, sit down,’ he said cordially ; ‘you will pardon me if I continue my work. No, you cannot help me. I thank you for the offer, but it is a thing which I prefer to do, though it is troublesome. I know where to lay my hand on every volume and pamphlet when I arrange them myself, and I

cannot blame others if they be ill-arranged.'

'But I wanted to speak to you, sir,' said his visitor shyly, standing irresolute beside the ladder instead of going at once to the tables to resume his studies, as it was his habit to do.

'Well, speak on ; I can hear whilst I finish my job,' said Ser Checchi indifferently.

His mind was but little in what he was saying, for he had just come upon a 'Father of the Church,' stained and gnawed by mice, and the sight distressed him sorely.

'What use is it to have cats and women in a house ?' he murmured, as he turned over the desecrated pages, forgetful that neither his cats nor his women

were allowed to do what they chose in those rooms.

The younger man continued to stand at the foot of the steps, holding his soft felt hat in his hands. He was embarrassed and constrained ; he had come to do what was difficult and distressing to him, and he would have been glad of any remark from 'Ser Checchi which should have made it less abrupt and painful to begin the subject on which he came thither. But Ser Checchi said nothing ; he stood turning over the palimpsest regretfully, wholly engrossed by the sight of the sacrilegious inroads of the mice. Odisio saw that he must break rudely into the confession which he came prepared to make, or leave it unconfessed.

‘Ser Checchi, you have been very kind to me,’ said the younger man, in a low voice. ‘I do not wish to abuse or disgrace your kindness. So I go whilst I still have done neither.’

‘What?’ asked Ser Checchi, pausing in his work with his feather-brush poised in the air. It always cost him an effort to leave the lucid air of impersonal thought for the vexed and hazy atmosphere of human fancies and actions. ‘What do you mean to imply? Have I accused you of any wrongdoing?’

Was it possible, he wondered, that the temptation to steal some of his manuscripts, or purloin some of his annotations upon them, was so strong that the Brescian feared to succumb to its influence if he stayed?

‘No,’ replied Odisio, with hesitation, ‘I do not think that you remember or perceive. Ser Checchi, I do not like to leave with any misunderstanding between us. You have opened your doors and your books so hospitably to a stranger that I had better be honest with you. If I remain near her I cannot answer for my own self-control. I may say to your daughter what would offend and distress you.’

The old man did not answer. He looked astonished and perplexed, but not displeased.

‘My daughter—Beldia?’ he said aloud at last. How strange and sad it was that a fine scholar and diligent student like this Lombard should be led away

from the pursuit of learning by any amorous fancy !

The younger man watched him with a beating heart. He was strongly attached to the librarian, and he was afraid that his own confession, and the discussion which might arise from it, would make an irrevocable difference between them.

But he spoke the truth manfully.

‘ Yes,’ he answered, ‘ Madamigella Beldia. Who could be with her as you have allowed me to be and not see in her the flower of womanhood, one beside whom all other women are as nought ? I cannot, I dare not, say to her what I feel ; therefore I go.’

Ser Checchi stared at him, still as-

tonished, and unable to persuade himself of the truth.

‘I thought you came for the sake of *these*!’ he said sadly, and with severity of reproach, as he included all the hundreds of volumes, bound and unbound, which were around them in the circle of his lifted feather-brush.

‘I care for them, indeed, but not as I care for her,’ murmured Odisio.

Ser Checchi gave a gesture of reproach and of scorn.

He turned round to the shelves again, and resumed his labour of love, flicking the dust off the tops and sides of the books, and now and then moving some stray volume back to its proper place, or putting together some loose pamphlets which had got into disorder.

There was no sound in the room, into which the sunshine came mellowed through the yellow time-dimmed casements behind their iron bars.

It seemed to him so sorrowful, so shameful, that no one except himself loved learning as it should be loved, as so far beyond, as so far above, all human frailties and attachments.

‘I have offended and disappointed you ?’ Odisio said timidly, after a long silence.

‘No, no,’ said the elder man gently, but with a certain tone of chagrin and regret. ‘You are young. It was to be expected. Youth is always drawn to youth, and filled with folly.’

‘Folly !’ said Odisio, with irrepressible indignation. ‘Methinks higher wisdom

there cannot be than to appreciate the perfections of a woman so noble and so pure !’

Ser Checchi smiled faintly as one who looked down upon a child at play.

‘ You are an enthusiast,’ he said, with a little irony. ‘ My daughter is a good and industrious maiden, but nothing more wonderful than that. Thank Heaven, such are not rare ! If it be true that you regard her with tenderness, I know not why you should so fear and hesitate to say so. Neither she nor I can claim to be great or gentle people. She has had many suitors—but she favours them little. She is wedded to her duties here. I cannot tell whether she would favour you any more than those whom she has dismissed ; but I

see no reason why you should not try your fate.'

Odisio heard with mingled bewilderment and joy and pain. He was ashamed of himself and of his poverty. Ser Checchi was so unworldly that it was evident the things of the world had no place in his calculations. But the younger man could not forget or ignore the miserable nudity of his own circumstances, the cruel fact that he in reality possessed nothing except the clothes in his trunk, the instruments and portfolios of his art, and such scanty pittance as he could earn by daily work.

'Ser Checchi,' he said, with visible emotion, 'I have been a foolish, graceless idler; I have thrown away my opportunities and the intelligence Nature gave

me; I have no position, no home, no fixed income, no fixed stipend even to depend on. I have no right to speak as a suitor to any woman, however poor; much less to one as favoured by circumstances as your daughter.'

Ser Checchi sighed impatiently, and his pale cheek grew hot.

'My daughter,' he began abruptly, and then paused. 'My daughter,' he added, in another tone, 'has an extravagant brother, and a father who has never been wise in financial matters. Cease to think of her as a maiden well dowered. She might once have been so. Now she never can be so. It matters not why, but she will never be so now. If she care for you and you for her, I would not oppose the betrothal. But I

would make one condition. You must have some assured position, or have gained some small capital, before I could sanction your marriage. I should not be exacting, but she would have to be guaranteed from want.'

He spoke with deep feeling and some pained embarrassment.

Odisio heard with an immense and unutterable amazement ousting for the moment every other sentiment from his mind. That he could be a welcome suitor to Beldia's father seemed to him such a miraculous happiness that he was bewildered and stunned. He could not even find consecutive words to express his gratitude, and he did not even perceive how strange it was that a man so reserved as Francesco Ardiglione should

thus confess his necessities, or one so apparently well situated be conscious of his own inability to keep his favourite child from poverty. All the younger man was sensible of was that a future suddenly opened out before him like the very gates of heaven.

‘But, but——’ he stammered, ‘would it be possible, could I comply with your conditions, that Madamigella Beldia ever would deign to think of me? Surely, oh, surely not!’

Ser Checchi dusted some books with a few impatient movements.

‘That is for you to judge,’ he said. ‘You are a personable man, and should not be too modest. I have no idea of my daughter’s opinion of you; but I should not think it unfavourable. You

have my leave to try and please her. But remember — she is poor, poor, poor.'

He said the words with so strong an emphasis and with so strange a manner, and such obvious agitation, that a wild fancy struck the Lombard for a moment: was Ser Checchi one of those harmless monomaniacs who call themselves penniless when their secret drawers and hidden boxes are full of gold and silver?

Was it possible to believe that a man who knew that he must leave his daughter portionless would keep unsold a 'Divina Commedia' worth a hundred thousand francs?

But this thought was secondary to him, and almost unimportant, beside the marvellous rapture of the fact that the

old man authorized him to gain the heart and hand of Beldia, if he could.

He could scarcely believe his senses. The sombre walls of the book-room swam before him in a circle of light. He saw the thin, pale hand of Ser Checchi and the moving feather-duster in a dazzle of dancing sun-rays. Then, in a rush of exquisite joy and gratitude, while the tears gushed to his eyes, he stayed that ivory-like hand in its wandering amongst the volumes, and, bending very low, touched it with his lips.

The elder man drew it quickly away, not unkindly, but with embarrassment, as of one before a homage undeserved.

‘I am not worthy; I am not worthy,’ he said, with a tinge of red coming on his pale, fine features.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE morrow was the Feast of St. John, the time-honoured popular feast of Florence. In other times it used to be a day of rare pageantry, civic, military, and ecclesiastical. In these times it is shorn of its splendours, which are transferred to the democratic celebration of the statute.

The heart of the Florentine populace, however, is still closely attached to St. John's Day; and from break of dawn, when the great bells boom and swell

over the sleeping city, to midnight, when the fires die one by one on the cupolas and domes and belfries, the population is astir in joyous and harmless agitation.

Beldia was wont to see what she could see of the illuminations from the tower platform, and avoid the press and noise and trouble of the crowds.

From her terraced roof she could watch the fireworks blaze upon the Carrara bridge, and the rockets slide along the cords above the river, and the great belfry of the Palazzo Vecchio glitter with its many stars of light, while the communal banner streamed upon the wind. Below her stretched the moonlit and firelit river, the black masses of the gathered crowds, the

palaces, the bridges, the quays, and far away the deep woods of the Cascine, and the hills, lit here and there with bonfires. She liked better to sit there in quietude by her father's side, amongst her herbs and plants, in the intense silence of night, to which no echo even from the rejoicing city below could reach them, than to descend into the crowded streets, to be jostled and hustled and pushed from side to side under the illumined dome of the cathedral or the sparkling of the baptistery.

‘Will you not come down into the streets?’ asked Odisio of her on that evening. ‘There is music in many places, and the illuminations are fine. I would take care that no harm should come to you or to your father.’

She thanked him, but declined.

‘I am not afraid in any way. Our crowds are always good-natured and orderly. But I dislike all noise, and up here it is more mysterious, more romantic, more beautiful. One can believe that one is still in the Renaissance. One sees the lights and the fires, the sky and the water, the grand cupolas and towers and spires; and one does not see the modern ugliness which, when one is in the streets, spoils the illusion of it all.’

‘As you will,’ said Odisio. ‘May I stay here with you?’

‘Certainly.’

Ser Checchi had come up to the roof, as it had been his habit to do ever since he had been a little boy in the

years when the century had been young. It was one of the things unchanged, wholly unchanged, since his childhood. Down below there were changes; the people were no more the merry and picturesque throngs of his youth, and the populace no more went with devout unanimity to the noonday Mass in the duomo; but, as he looked down from his tower platform on St. John's Night, nothing seemed altered in the city lying below.

The fireworks, the illuminations, the river alive with light, the spires and domes outlined with fire, the hills studded with bonfires, the quays and bridges black with multitudes—all these were the same as they had been in the days of his childhood, and the scene was pre-

cisely the same which stretched below, radiant in moonlight and lamplight, and with the same summer skies and the same shadowy landscape around it.

Ser Checchi felt as if he were a young child once more, in his little nankeen vest and breeches, with his ruffled shirt open at his throat, and his light hair curling on his shoulders.

Ah, what good times those had been ! How simple and honest and cheerful and full of goodwill all life had been when his good father—sacred be his dust !—had brought him up the wooden ladder-like stair on his shoulders, and had set him by the battlemented parapet to watch the night ! There was the same kind of flowers growing then as now in their pots and boxes ; the same kind of pigeons

roosted then as now in their green wooden dovecot; and the same fires lighted water, and bridge, and dome, and palace. At such moments Ser Checchi almost wished that he had read less, and that he had lived more.

‘How like you look to my grandmother!’ he said to Beldia this evening.

Perhaps it was only his imagination, but it seemed to him as if Beldia grew more like her great-granddame every year. She had the same calm carriage, and the same serene, kind smile, the same clear skin that no sun could tan or redden, the same grave fair brows, like those of a Madonna of Dürer or a maiden of Mieris.

As he looked at her on this festal night, as the light from the brilliant

skies shone on her eyes and breast, Ser Checchi thought for the first time that it was natural that young men should find her fair, and dream of her as a companion for their lives.

‘And it would be well if she had someone besides myself to care for her,’ he thought, with a pang. ‘I have been too selfish and too careless by far.’

The sun had sunk down behind the Carrara mountains some half-hour before, but the skies were still radiant when the fireworks began, and the blending of moonlight and lamplight and sunset reflection made a beautiful glory on the river and the shores.

Up above, on the tower-roof, Beldia and her father and Odisio watched it all; the dog also, with his forelegs resting on

the parapet, and his excitement finding vent in sharp, quick, smothered barks like minute-guns. Folko had seen many an illumination thus during his ten years of life, but the sight never failed to agitate and puzzle him exceedingly, as though it were something which he had never beheld before.

It was a balmy and brilliant night; the air was clear, though warm; the scent of the carnations and lemon verbena was sweet under the dew; the bats flew above their heads, startled by the fires leaping and sparkling below, and the rushing and roaring of the pyrotechnic showers. The spectacle was soon over, the last girandola shot up from the centre of the bridge, and the last reflection faded off the water: alone the

illuminated cupolas and towers across the river remained ablaze, and the old iron cressets, filled with lighted oil, which were hung round beneath the battlements of Taddeo's tower, answered them as they had done with every mid-summer throughout six centuries.

The night of St. John was over for another year.

Ser Checchi turned away from the parapet, and went noiselessly through the flowers down the wooden stair, leaving the Lombard alone with his daughter; for the woman-servant had already hurried away to her kitchen to see that her saucepans for the supper were not burning or cooling.

Folko remained with his forepaws upon the stone ledge, his eyes gazing

intently down on to the crowded streets below, and Beldia stayed also, lost in thought as she gazed at the flowing river, rippling like molten silver underneath the stars. She, too, had seen the illuminations of St. John's Night for as many years as she could remember.

Odisio stood beside her silently, his heart beating in tumult.

He understood that her father had left them on purpose thus alone. But he seemed to himself much too wretched, penniless, and friendless a wanderer to dare to offer her his empty hand.

At last, as she turned slowly and reluctantly away from gazing on the beauty of the night, he dared to speak, his throat contracting as though his own voice choked him.

‘Madamigella Beldia,’ he said with great timidity, ‘I told your father yesterday that I must go away, because I am a miserable idler with no home or fortune. But he gave me leave to tell you—to tell you—what I think you must know well. You are the only woman who lives on earth for me.’

She did not answer; she looked away from him, drawing one of the red carnations through her fingers; the moonlight fell on her white gown and her bent head.

‘If you could pardon me—give me any hope?’ he murmured, gathering courage, ‘I would try to make some money, some place, worthy of you. Would it be ever possible?’

‘I could not leave my father,’ she

answered in a low, soft voice which thrilled him to the soul.

Folko came and thrust his nose in friendly fashion against their hands, which in that moment touched and clasped each other.

CHAPTER IX.

‘THAT she should go and promise herself to a foreigner, a Lombard, a Brescian!’ said Veronica with indignation to the boy Poldo. ‘When she could have had Pampilio Querci, who will die a town councillor, or any good, sound-moneyed man who comes about her, and would have kept her in silk gowns and velvet mantles all her years! Ay, I know the Lombard is a fine-built man and a soft spoken and goodly to look at; but good looks make no bread, and

gentle words butter no parsnips, and he says himself he is as poor as a church rat ! What use is that ? There will be waiting, waiting, waiting, and what does that mean ? That a woman's bloom goes like the bloom off the grapes which you shut up in a closet to keep for Christmas. The grapes are the same grapes as they were when you put them away, but when you send them up on your dish they are wrinkled and faded, and the flavour is gone. That is what waiting does for women. The signorina is bonnier than most, and will be well-looking when she is fifty ; but, all the same, it will do her no good to wait till this stranger has got the wherewithal to keep her. Querci is already as round as an egg, and is a youngster who will

die Syndic of the city likely enough. Besides, there are other reasons——’

She stopped short, for though grumbling and garrulous and sensible to the charm of the attorney’s five-franc pieces, she was a loyal soul, and knew that she had no right to discuss her master’s and mistress’s circumstances with a young lad like Poldo.

All that was known to her or to the neighbours was that the stranger from the north was affianced to the daughter of Ser Checchi—vaguely known, no date nor any kind of detail being added to the bare fact. Much gossip was made about it, set on foot by the baker’s wife, who had a piqued and jealous fancy for the handsome Lombard herself; and when anyone ventured to

speaking directly of it to Ser Checchi, he replied, in a reserved tone, that his consent had been given conditionally, but that there was no reason to believe that the marriage would take place for years.

‘There are many reasons to believe that it will never take place at all,’ said Vestuccio to himself with a smile, whilst with a beaming countenance he bowed before Ser Checchi, and said aloud, ‘Long life and all joy and honour to the betrothed young people, sir! Surely an angel is in your dwelling, if anywhere on earth.’

‘My daughter has been well brought up, and resembles her mother and grandmother,’ replied Ser Checchi stiffly and distantly.

Beldia received her neighbours’ felici-

citations with her usual serenity of manner.

‘There is nothing fixed,’ she answered to their importunate inquiries. ‘Of course I shall never leave my father whilst he needs me.’

It was no one’s business what had been decided on between her father and her betrothed. She shrank from comment and curiosity with the sensitiveness of a refined and reserved nature.

Odisio was too happy to heed or weigh any material questions. Ser Checchi had indeed said to him:

‘You know my conditions. You must show me that you can maintain her before I can give her to you. Look for nothing from me,’ he had added more harshly. ‘I am ill off—ill off—and my

son would drain the purse of Plutus dry.'

But this was enough to fill the heart of the younger man with rejoicing. He had her promise to wait for him; it seemed to him that it would inspire the dullest clod into genius and ambition, and give to a block of stone the impulse of vitality and effort. He wrote to his mother the tenderest and gayest letter he had ever penned; and to his old master in Milan he sent a pressing entreaty to find him work, no matter how hard, but lucrative. His idle, careless, whimsical life of accident and adventure was at an end: he was sensible of powers and learning in him beyond the common possession of ordinary men, and he saw the future in radiant colours like the fires

of the girandola on that ever-blessed night of St. John.

As he walked through the streets with his elastic tread and his erect and martial carriage, a smile in his eyes and a song on his lips, his rivals looked after him with scowling glances, and Pampilio Querci muttered an oath as his own small, thin shadow fell across the sunny path.

‘Never mind,’ said Vestuccio consolingly to him. ‘Let the poor fools dream on as they like. Their plans will never come to anything, you may be sure.’

Meantime those midsummer days and eves were full of sweetness to Beldia. She had not thought the earth could hold so much happiness. The old tower roof in the starry evenings, with its odours of

thyme and sweet peas, seemed to her like the enchanted garden of Angelica. Her suitor loved to converse of the future ; but to her the present was fully enough. She did not care to look forward ; these quiet morning hours, which brought him to his studies in the book-room, this balmy evening time, when all the labours of the day were over, and they were free to go up and sit against the old stone battlements and watch the stars in their courses, were all she coveted. Odisio's mother had written with tenderness and gladness ; and his master had also answered in kindest strain, promising his influence and efforts ; only Cirillo had replied not a word to the tidings sent him. They supposed that he had been absent from

Rome when the news had been written ; they never knew much of his movements.

‘ It does not matter whether he is well or ill-pleased,’ said her father angrily, when such silence pained her. ‘ He is not your master nor mine, and we have no need to consult his wishes.’

One night, when it was late, and no one but Beldia was awake in the tower, there came a loud knocking at the iron-barred door below, and Folko barked loudly. Everyone in the place was asleep. Beldia alone leaned against the parapet of the roof, whither she had gone half an hour before to watch the tall form of the Lombard pass down the narrow street. Being wakeful, and allured by the sublimity of the night,

she had remained there looking, now up at Saturn and Jupiter in the heavens, and now down on the gliding Arno water and the blackness of the bridge arches.

At the loud rapping below she leaned over the machicolations and called loudly :

· Who is there ?’

Far above as she was, her voice reached the street below faintly in the perfect stillness of the night.

· ‘It is I, Cirillo !’ called her brother angrily, from beneath the arch of the door.

Taking her lantern in her hand, she called the dog and hurried down the dark shaft of the stairway. It was long and steep, but she knew those winding

steps by heart and ran down them with quick, sure feet. She set her lantern on the stone floor when she reached the bottom, and began to pull aside the rusty and massive bolts, and turn in its lock the huge key, which had been made by a cunning locksmith in the thirteenth century.

Slowly the great door yielded to her effort, and she dragged it open, little by little, to the summer night without. Her brother came in roughly, scarcely returning her embrace.

‘Who could suppose you were all abed at this hour?’ he said impatiently. ‘The train is only just in from Rome.’

‘My father is always early to bed and early to rise, as you know,’ she said, in surprise at his negligent and ill-tem-

pered greeting. ‘Please come upstairs as quietly as you can, not to wake him. Your room is always ready, and I will call up Veronica and soon get you some supper.’

With muttered words of dissatisfaction Cirillo climbed the stairs after her, pushing back, ill-humouredly, the well-meant caresses of Folko.

‘Bring me some wine,’ he said, when he reached the chamber in which their meals were served; ‘I want no food. Do not call up the woman. I only came to speak to you. The devil fetch me! How good-looking you have grown!’

Beldia looked at him in trouble and astonishment. He was flushed, dusty, dishevelled; he had a sullen and coarse

expression, and the natural beauty of his face was inflamed and swollen.

‘Are you not well?’ she said with hesitation, as she lighted a lamp and placed it on the table.

‘Get the wine, the best wine you have; or, better still, some brandy,’ he replied, as he cast himself heavily into his father’s great arm-chair.

Greatly disquieted, she went and took a flask of seven-year-old Chianti wine from a cupboard and set it before him.

‘I will bring you cold meats and bread in a moment, if you wish,’ she said; ‘or I will fry some eggs and bacon.’

‘I want no food,’ said her brother ungraciously; and he poured himself out

a big beaker of the wine and drained it.

‘Have you no brandy?’ he asked.

‘No; father never buys it.’

Cirillo drank again and again, then leaned his elbows on the table, and his chin on his hands, and looked up at her.

‘What cursed trash did you write me, that you are betrothed to a Lombard without a penny?’

Her face flushed with anger.

‘I am promised to a man whom I love.’

Cirillo laughed unkindly.

‘Women do not marry men they love. They marry men who help their families. I mean you to wed with Pampilio Querci, and with no one else, my fair one.’

‘I do not ask you what I shall do,’

said Beldia quietly. 'It is enough that my father and I are of one mind.'

'Who cares for your mind or your heart? You have a handsome person, and that you will give where I tell you.'

'You had better go to your chamber. We can speak of these matters in the morning.'

'I will speak of them now,' said Cirillo, taking another draught of wine. 'Things are in a bad way with me. I have no luck. I have played and lost. I have fought the city guards, and there is a hue and cry out against me, and I want to get to the coast and out of the country.'

Beldia listened, with her face growing white and set.

‘My father,’ she said faintly, looking towards the door of the room, as though she saw her father’s form there.

‘Oh, I do not want to see him, that you may be sure,’ said her brother, with a fierce, short laugh. ‘You must give me all the money you have, and I will go to sleep in this chair for a few hours, and then take the earliest train to Livorno; there is one at five in the morning, I think. How much money can you get together?’

‘I have no money,’ she replied. ‘I have a few francs left of the house-allowance for the week. You know that I have nothing of my own.’

‘And you would marry a penniless scholar? you fool! Querci would give you money if you asked him——’

‘That is a shameful thing to say, Cirillo.’

‘A fig for your fancies ! Do you suppose a woman like you cannot get money if she wants it ? Many men have come and gone here who would have asked nothing better than to open their purses to you. But you were always a stiff-necked jade.’

‘For shame, Cirillo !’

He looked cunningly at her out of his swimming and sleepy eyes.

‘You are in love with your Lombard ?’

She said nothing, but a wave of colour passed over her face and she turned away her head. It hurt her inexpressibly to have this coarse, rude touch laid on her tenderest and most sacred feelings.

Cirillo laughed aloud.

‘Very well, my saint. Then if you do not bring me out your pearls, I shall go and knock up this Messer Odisio and tell him that I forbid the banns.’

‘My pearls?’

The pearls had been her mother’s, and they constituted those *vezzi* or dowry-jewels without which no Florentine maiden can be decently betrothed or wedded. These necklaces vary in value from the rare virgin pearls, large as cherries, of the young princess, to the seed pearls, small as grains of rice, of the girl of the populace or of the peasantry. Those of Beldia were of medium excellence: three strings of them, worth, on the whole, some three thousand francs. Cirillo knew their value to a

centime, for they had often been in his hands.

‘I could not give you my pearls,’ she said, stupefied. ‘You must be mad to ask it. Father would never consent.’

‘No doubt he will never consent. If we were fools enough to ask him!’ said Cirillo, with an ironical laugh in her face. ‘But you will go and get them, Madonna mine, or I will go and find your betrothed and tell him you are to wed with Pampilio Querci.’

‘You may tell him what you like. He will not believe it.’

‘I intend you to marry Querci.’

‘You may intend what you please. I shall not do it.’

‘We shall see. But first get me the pearls. I must be out of the country as

fast as I can, for—I may as well tell you the whole. There was a quarrel, and the guards drew their swords, and I shot one, and I believe he is dead. The affair may be troublesome. The pater would not care to see the carabineers come in here after me. Yet that will be so if I be found at daybreak in Florence.’

Beldia said nothing. The callous carelessness of the confession froze her blood. It was worse than the crime itself to be thus indifferent in its narration.

‘Oh, my father! my dear father!’ she murmured, with sobs strangling her breath. ‘Such a long and pure and honourable life—disgraced by you, disgraced by his own son!’

She was not a woman who ever gave

way to emotion, but this horror overwhelmed her ; she turned her face to the wall, and her frame shook with the force of her weeping. She had been so happy such a little while before, dreaming her dreams under the starry skies.

‘ The old idiot is disgraced by himself,’ said Cirillo savagely. ‘ He has his signatures out by the dozen. Querci could square all that ; you must marry Querci. But for the moment get me your pearls. I can sell them to the Jew goldsmiths in Livorno very well. If you had sent me money when I wrote to you last, I should not now be in this plight. It is all your fault. The men set on me because, when I lost, I had no money to pay, and I defended myself, and there was noise

and fuss, and the guards came, and I shot one, I tell you. It was all your fault. How can a man live without money?’

‘He lives by the work of his hands or his brain,’ said Beldia, thinking of Odisio, and in the trouble and confusion of mind scarcely noticing what her brother had said of their father’s signatures.

Cirillo swore a bad oath.

‘I do not choose to do either,’ he said sullenly. ‘Whilst I am young I mean to enjoy. When one is old, one can labour. Does my father work that you honour him so? All his substance goes in his one craze for old books. It were a harmless luxury in a rich old man, but in a tradesman it is a crime, a

bigger crime than mine. But come, go and get me the pearls. I want to sleep while I can, and you will give me something to eat at four, and then I will get out of the house before anyone wakes. Even the charcoal-men must not see me.'

Beldia did not speak; the sobs in her throat were stilled by a great effort, but she was bewildered and full of horror. Her longing impulse was to send for Odisio—he was so manly, so courageous, so loyal; her heart yearned for the comfort and support of his presence; she had that entire confidence in him which is the joy and strength of love. But for his sake she did not dare to summon him. Her brother was already set against him; the two men might

quarrel, if they met would almost surely do so, and Cirillo might use his revolver on him as he had done on the guard in Rome. ‘No,’ she said to herself; ‘no, Odisio should not be brought into danger by her. Sooner would she suffer anything than run that risk.’

‘Listen to me,’ she said, striving to steady her voice and combat all weakness of emotion. ‘There is no testimony that your tale is true. You have a strong imagination when you need money. What guarantee have I that, if I beggar myself at your request, you will really leave this town and really cease to trouble those I love?’

‘None at all,’ said her brother jeeringly. ‘I do not offer you vows and

proofs. You will bring me out your pearls, because, if you do not, I shall shake my father out of his sleep and get what I want, and I shall then go and find out your Brescian and pick a quarrel with him. There are plenty of knives in Florence. Come, Madonna mine. Do not provoke me. Patience is not one of my many virtues.'

She was clear and firm in resolve when emergency arose, and through the confusion of her mind before the confession and demands of her brother these two necessities were beyond all imperative : her father must not know of Cirillo's visit, and her betrothed must not be brought into any peril from it. Blood soon runs high, she knew, and blows are given which often carry death

with them almost before a word is said. She had not dwelt in a populous riverain quarter without knowing how hot and bitter men's unbridled passions can become.

No; even in the painful stupor of her thoughts, she resolved that Odisio and Cirillo must not meet, nor must her father hear of his son's ill-doing.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN the first rosy warmth of the daybreak came over the Apennines and smote the gray turrets of the tower, arousing the pigeons from their wooden cotes, and sending the bats to roost in the belfry of Santo Spirito, Beldia sat alone in her own chamber, and her brother was gone. She had not undressed, nor had she slept a moment in the past night : she sat still and sorely troubled, the empty case, in which the pearls had been, kept lying on her lap.

Their loss oppressed her with the weight of a deadly calamity. It was not because they were jewels, or because she cared to wear them, but they had been her mother's, and she had always felt a kind of benediction in their cool, soft touch. And how could she account to her father for their disappearance? How could she reconcile him to the sight of her on saints' days and on Sundays, without that three-stringed collar to which he was so used, and which seemed a very part and parcel of her own white throat?

She sat motionless, with the old leather box lying useless on her knees.

Cirillo had tossed it aside as clumsy and cumbersome, and had folded the

pearls up in a sheet of paper and slipped them into his waistcoat pocket.

She sat and gazed at it as the cold roseate light of the earliest morning came through the narrow casement.

She had first worn them at her first communion. Her father himself had clasped them about her throat, and had said: ‘Be your mother’s spirit with you ever.’

And now they were gone, the poor, pure, pretty things, to be weighed in the oily hands of dealers, and might lie on the naked breasts of coarse, indecent women ! The tears fell from her eyes slowly one by one, and rolled down on to the old black empty jewel-case.

She could not keep a secret from her father. Although she had long been

in the habit of keeping to herself all things which would have annoyed or troubled him, in order to leave him to that intellectual quiet which he prized and needed, she had never hidden anything of importance from him, nor answered any question of his untruly or disingenuously.

She resolved that she would tell him that she had given her pearls to Cirillo to sell; but that she would spare him, if she could, the knowledge of his son's offence against the law.

And when she met him in the forenoon she did tell him this much; and it seemed to her that her father took the news in a strange manner.

‘You will not have even those, then?’ he muttered in a sad and muffled

voice. ‘Why, oh, why did you strip yourself for that leech, that knave, that hound? What use is it to give Cirillo aught? He is like the thirsty sea-sand, which ever drinks and never has enough.’

He did not ask her how she had known of her brother’s demands, or how the pearls had been transmitted to him. He asked no questions; he was only pained and oppressed.

‘Even your mother’s necklace! Even that!’ he repeated. It afflicted him keenly, but he did not show any anger, as she had feared that he would do, nor did he even blame her.

‘What right have I to find fault?’ she heard him murmur to himself. Had he heard of his son’s advent, like

that of a thief in the night, and did he purposely avoid interrogation and explanation? She almost fancied that he did so, and that he knew of Cirillo's secret visit; for he sent for a skilful locksmith of the Fondaccio, and had the locks altered of those drawers and chests in which the Dante and the most precious of his manuscripts were lying.

To Odisio she said nothing. She could not bring herself to speak of her brother's evil conduct to one who through poverty and temptation had always kept his head so high, his hands so clean, his honour so unsullied.

The days went on their quiet course, and the summer came, and the city grew empty. Even the little tradesfolk

in turn shut up their shutters and went out into the country hills or down to the sea-shore. The lemon-sellers wandered through vacant streets, and the barrows of melons and plums were rolled underneath deserted houses, and there seemed no living creatures left except the poor thirsty, muzzled dogs, and the hot, tired cab-horses, and the flowers which hung their drooping heads at all the corners of the palaces, and found no buyers, and died of heat and thirst unpitied.

At this season of the year they were always used to go up to Antella, taking Veronica and Folko with them, and leaving the care of the pigeons and plants to the cobbler who lived below, and who fulfilled his trust conscientiously, and was proud and elate when,

on her return, Beldia praised the healthy appearance of his charges.

The fifteenth of July had never come and gone without Ser Checchi saying, often with regret:

‘It grows too hot for the city ; pack your clothes, and we will take the diligence to-morrow or next day.’

And Beldia was so used to the annual exodus that by this date all her arrangements were always already made, and there was nothing to do but to hand over the pigeons’ food and the gardening tools to the cobbler for the rest of the summer.

‘My father will be sure to ask you to come with us to Antella,’ she had said more than once to Odisio.

But the fifteenth of July came and

went, and there had been no mention of moving to the country.

It became increasingly difficult, too, to obtain from him the money necessary for the agricultural outlay. On Tuscan lands the owner must purchase cattle, tools, seeds, and all such necessities, and if the year be a bad one must maintain his peasantry as well. This especial year had been unusually bad; the rains had been too long withheld, and then had come out of season; the corn had been ravaged by storms, the vines were sickly, the show of olives was meagre, the foot-and-mouth disease had visited the district; and her father, who was always wont to take these caprices of nature with perfect philosophy, was now irritated and depressed by such losses and

troubles to a degree wholly unlike himself. Yet they were no more than are constantly to be encountered and prepared for by those who have anything to do with land and its cultivation ; and the year, though not likely to be a fruitful one, was not more disastrous than a similar one ten years earlier, when she had seen her father's serene and gentle humour scarcely stirred even by a passing regret.

She waited a little while this day, hesitating to worry him with those coarse, cruel needs ; and then, as her father was about to return to his studies, she said timidly :

‘ Ruggiero was here at noon.’

Ruggiero was the contadino at their little country place of Antella.

‘Well?’ asked Ser Checchi, pausing with some annoyance, his thumb and forefinger between the pages of the volume which he was longing to peruse.

‘What of that, my dear?’

‘The red cow is dead.’

‘Another cow! Cows are always dying. They are melancholy beasts.’

‘She drank at the river, and she swallowed a small fish, and it stuck across her gullet and killed her.’

‘He must get another,’ said Ser Checchi, opening his volume with some annoyance.

‘But the yield of the corn is so poor. There are only fifty staie.’

‘They are producing new wheat by artificial fertilization, but I am not sure that what is so produced will answer so

well as the natural plant,' replied her father. 'Do you not think the most wonderful secret of all in nature is how that germ lies hidden in the grain and sprouts when restored to earth? Those ears of wheat from the Pharaohs' sepulchres which germinate after two thousand years—explain it scientifically how you will, the miracle and the mystery of it still remain the same. Man is dumfounded before it. I once saw an Etruscan tomb opened away yonder by Volterra. There were some small kernels of wheat in a stone cippus. I planted them in a fresh-turned furrow, and they grew and multiplied! That I saw with my own eyes. And in due time I ate bread from the harvest of those grains. They had lain there in the

dark, in the bowels of the rock, for hundreds upon hundreds of years ; they had been put there in the stone cippus before the birth of Cæsar, before the rise of Rome ; yet life was still in them, dormant life, which awoke when they once again felt the moist, warm soil open to receive them—felt the dew, and the mould, and the showers. What is impossible in any resurrection after that ? How should the human mind follow or grasp the living spirit which was at work within the dry husk ?

She opened her lips to speak, but closed them again without speaking. His thoughts were happily far away with the impersonal ; she had not the heart to call him back to the sordid circumstances of the moment—to the poor

harvest, to the dead cow, to the straitened purse.

On the morrow, Beldia, as she gave him his coffee, ventured to say:

‘It is very warm. Are we not going to Antella this year?’

‘No,’ said Ser Checchi harshly, looking away from her as he spoke. ‘We shall not go this year.’

Beldia controlled her disappointment with difficulty from any outward expression. She occupied herself with pouring water on the coffee grains and cutting slices of bread for the boy Poldo’s breakfast. She longed intensely to ask who would enjoy the summer beauty of her olive orchards and her pine woods, but she restrained the impulse, and kept respectful silence.

He pushed away his cup of excellent coffee half-drunk, and sighed. He was a man of tender heart, and it hurt him to deny or deprive anyone of anything; and he knew that to Beldia, to pass the hot months in the freedom and freshness of the hills, was a source of infinite rejoicing and benefit, and she had gone to the Casentino with every summer of her life.

‘We cannot afford it,’ he added, in a tone of apology.

‘It costs less than living in the town,’ said Beldia, in surprise, ‘and the city heats weaken you, father; all the doctors say so.’

‘I am not weak,’ said her father hastily. ‘We cannot go to Antella; I have let—I have lent—the house.’

‘And never told me!’ she cried involuntarily, with an unspoken reproach in the exclamation.

‘Am I bound to ask your permission for my action?’ said the old man, with a severity and haste wholly unlike himself, and a flush on his face.

‘No,’ said Beldia meekly. ‘But I thought, I hoped, I had your confidence. I have always tried to merit it.’

‘I never said that you did not merit it,’ replied her father. ‘But it is tiresome to be obliged to explain.’

He was ashamed of his own silence and insincerity to her, and it made him irritable and sullen, with that ill-temper which is the result of suffering and contrition.

He beat impatiently on the table with

his spoon, and looked away from his daughter's inquiring eyes, which he felt ever and again turned on him.

With a violent effort at self-control, she did not even ask to whom he had let, or lent, their country retreat.

‘I shall know in time,’ she said to herself; ‘ill news always travels apace. All the gossips of the quarter will be screaming it out to each other soon enough.’

The words of her brother, which had passed by her scarcely noticed in the excitement of his visit, came back on her memory; he had spoken of their father's signatures. Was it possible that he, so prudent, so modest, so careful, so self-denying, so all-wise, as she deemed him, could be in debt? That his

means were narrowed of late she knew, but she had attributed it to Cirillo's extravagance, never to any possible act or fault of their parent. All that her father did was in her sight blameless, admirable, never to be doubted.

He took his hat and stick and went out early, saying something of a business engagement. Beldia had already done her market and household work; she went, as was her wont in her father's absence, to the library, to be in readiness if any customer or inquirer might come thither.

Odisio was at his own labours in the architect's office where he was temporarily engaged; he could never come to the tower until after six o'clock on week-days. She sat long alone, for the

boy Poldo was out on an errand, and Veronica busy in her kitchen and scullery, and it was not the hour at which the few frequenters of the library were used to present themselves.

She had taken her work with her, and seated herself near the high-barred window ; the books in their multitudes strewn around her, and the volumes and pamphlets, which her father would not allow to be disturbed, lying on the ground. Nine o'clock struck, and then ten ; the boy Poldo returned, and went to his desk, where, sitting all day with his head buried in his shoulders, he occupied himself unwillingly with the copying work allotted to him. It was very warm weather, and even the thick stone walls of Taddeo's tower could not

keep out the strong, heavy heats of mid July.

‘Aren’t we going at all to the country, madamigella?’ Poldo asked wistfully once, whilst his forefinger pursued the erratic path of a blue-bottle across his written page.

‘I am afraid not this year,’ said Beldia; and his respect for his mistress was so great that he did not dare ask why or wherefore. Only the chagrin of his heart spent itself in a loud groan, and found further vent in fiercely striking at the fly with his flat wooden ruler.

‘Finish your copying, Poldo, against my father comes back,’ said his mistress.

The boy applied himself to his un-

congenial task with unwilling compliance, and there was no sound in the book-room except the scratching of his metal pen and the buzzing of the escaped blue-bottle.

Now and then a cry came faintly from the street below of ‘Cenc-i-e!’ (bring out your rags) ‘Ov-a-freschi!’ (new-laid eggs) or ‘Co-co-me-ro!’ (water-melons), but by eleven o’clock even these ceased. The vendors had gone indoors, or sought some shady corner under a wall or a church porch, out of the blazing, cloudless, noontide heat.

The lower door of the tower was always left open in the hope that the open portals would invite passers-by to enter and ascend the stairs, and the door

of the library also stood open with a bell hung on to it by a chain which tinkled when anyone touched the chain. On the silence of the forenoon now the tinkle of this bell was heard, and a foot-step sounded on the stone floor of the entrance.

Beldia looked up expecting to see her father, and half rose to welcome him and take his sun umbrella. She saw instead a little sandy-haired thin man, with shabby clothes, who had a sheaf of papers under his arm.

Without taking off his hat he said to her :

‘Is the Signor Ardiglione in? No? Who are you, then? I will leave this paper with you.’

The boy Poldo turned round in his

seat with a scared inquisitive gaze : Beldia approached the visitor, and said with her habitual dignity and grace :

‘ I am Signor Ardiglione’s daughter. I can take any message for him ? ’

The rude thin man fumbled in his breast-pocket, and drew out an old-fashioned ink-horn and a new-fashioned metal pen. He scribbled at the foot of the document which he had brought, muttering half aloud as he did so :

‘ In the absence of—umph, umph !—this day of grace sixteenth July—umph—humph—speaking with his daughter—your name ? What is your name ? ’

‘ Beldia Maria Beatrice. ’

‘ Beldia Maria Beatrice, ’ murmured the little scribe, finishing his writing and restoring the ink-horn to his pocket ;

then he handed the paper to her and bustled out of the room.

She stood looking blankly down upon the document, with its ominous preamble ‘In the name of His Majesty, etc., etc.’ She had not known who the man was, because he was a newcomer in the neighbourhood; but she knew the look of a law-paper, and she perceived that this was one; a *precetto*, or sentence to pay money, under threat of distraint from that division of the tribunal which judges the affairs of the quarter of Santo Spirito.

For a *precetto* to be sent thus, it must have been preceded by citation, interrogation, and announcement of sentence. How was it that she had known nothing of any of these?

The boy Poldo had left off his copying, and was staring at her blankly.

‘The master is in trouble?’ he asked stupidly, but good-naturedly. ‘They have said so a good while in the street.’

‘No, no ; you should not think such things of your employer,’ said his young mistress, casting the document into a drawer and turning the key on it. ‘It is some mere matter of business—a summons for some contravention, I suppose.’

Poldo looked incredulous.

‘The people round here all say that he is in debt, head and ears over ; and that he has been called up at the Pretura everybody knows, except you, madamigella.’

‘My good lad,’ said Beldia with

severity, ‘never speak of your master, I order you, nor let others speak of him ; only be sure that he is the best and wisest man of all men living.’

Poldo turned round to his writing, and, unseen by her, put his tongue in his cheek and winked at the big gray cat of the house.

He was much attached to Beldia, but for his master he had no liking, and he thought the learned scholar a poor fool.

‘Throwing away all his means on old paper and musty books, when he might drink *vin santa* and eat lamb and kid three times a day !’ thought the young Florentine.

With a great effort over herself and her overwhelming anxiety, Beldia had

taken the key out of the drawer and had shut away the fatal document without looking on more than those topmost words which told her what its character and meaning were. She would not allow herself to intrude on her father's secrets in his absence.

But the uncertainty and the anxiety were torture to her.

A precetto, which is in reality a power to seize goods within five days given to a creditor by the tribunal, could mean nothing but trouble; and all the signs which she had seen in her father of late years—of preoccupation, of care, of economy—came back upon her mind with painful distinctness in cruel confirmation of that she feared. She could not go on working, though

she made a pretence of doing so to screen her agitation from the boy Poldo, whose sharp, little black eyes she felt ever and again upon her, as though they were gimlets, piercing her very soul.

He was a good-natured boy, and not unfaithful ; but he was curious, and had a vulgar tongue when it was allowed to wag at its will.

It grieved her that he should have seen the advent of the officer of the tribunal. She knew that he would talk of nothing else when he should run out for his hour of liberty and play at disc-throwing with other lads in the Santo Spirito square, or loll on the water-steps of the Arno, by the Santa Trinita bridge.

Her lips opened on an impulse to ask him to say nothing, but she did not speak, for she knew that to ask such a thing was useless, and that though he would promise silence readily, it would be beyond him to keep his promise.

Time went on, and the church clocks boomed out the meridian hour.

As its last stroke sounded Ser Checchi entered : he looked jaded and dusty and hot, and very pale, paler even than was usual with him.

Beldia's heart ached at the thought that she must give him the dreaded document.

She brought him his loose linen library coat, and his slippers and a glass of water, with some slices of fresh lemon cut into it. Then she let him sit and rest a few

moments whilst she sent Poldo out on an errand which would occupy him some little time.

He drank thirstily, and remained reclining in the osier chair which she had placed for him; the light fell across his face, and she was struck by the worn, aged look which it wore.

It hurt her to the quick to tell him of the hated paper which had come for him in his absence; and yet she dared not withhold the knowledge of it from him, lest worse should ensue. She went and unlocked the drawer and brought it to him.

‘Dear father,’ she said softly, ‘this came when you were away. I have not looked at it, but I see it is the kind of paper which brings trouble with it. Will

you not let me know what sorrow hangs over you?’

He snatched the document from her with the roughest movement which she had ever seen in him; the blue veins on his temples swelled and throbbed; he held it at arm’s-length and stared at it.

‘He has broken faith with me,’ he said hoarsely. ‘He promised by all the saints to wait——’

Then he crumpled the act up in his hands, so that his daughter should not see what was written on it, and thrust it into his coat-pocket, and muttered some unintelligible words of which she could make no sense.

‘May I not know?’ she said piteously. ‘Oh, father, do not mistrust me; do not

mistrust me ; do not conceal anything from me—nor from Odisio ! He loves you—he would aid you.’

‘ I want no aid,’ said the old man sternly ; ‘ and did you conceal nothing when you gave your pearls to your worthless brother ? Go to, go to ! I do not call strangers or women to my councils.’

They were the harshest words which he had ever spoken to her, and the most unjust.

She measured his trouble by their injustice.

She did not press him further then, but went away to her own chamber, leaving the doors wide open, that she might hear at his slightest call.

He told her nothing all day. He was

at home throughout the afternoon, and two or three of his old customers and friends came thither, and she could hear him discussing and conversing with them as usual. But for the agitation and consternation which the sight of the document had caused to him, she could have believed that it was a summons of no importance. She tried to hope that it was so ; he was so wise, so frugal, so philosophic, she could not believe that he could have fallen into the common, stupid, vulgar difficulties which dog the steps of prodigals and spendthrifts. No one had ever been in business so exact as he, or so careful and moderate as he in private life.

At supper also Ser Checchi said nothing of the document which had

been left that morning, but he ate little and took a little more wine than was his wont, for he was usually over-abstemious in all things. He hurried over the meal under pretext of much business, and, after it, Beldia was left to suppress her torturing anxiety as best she could.

She was thankful when she heard the quick, light step of Odisio that evening on the stairs which led to the roof. She had ascended thither at sunset, partly from the habit of watering her plants at that hour, and partly from a heated sense of disquietude and restlessness and thirsty longing for the air.

She told her betrothed of what had so tormented her, looking eagerly in his face to read there if he had any knowledge of her father's liabilities.

Odisio's face grew overcast ; he did not answer her immediately with his usual candour.

‘Do you know anything ? Have you heard any rumour ?’ she asked him with earnest entreaty ; and he turned from her and walked a few paces up and down the platform before he replied to her questioning eyes and anxious words.

‘I think,’ he said at last, ‘that is, I fear, that Ser Checchi has some dilemmas which he does not confide to us. It is, I believe, thought that he has money troubles ; and I fear he has trusted some dealers and money-lenders too much.’

‘Vestuccio ?’ asked Beldia eagerly.

‘I have heard no names,’ replied

Odisio. ‘But it may very well be that Vestuccio is one of them, or, indeed, the prime mover in it all. The little I have seen of him gives me the impression that he is a cunning man. He was a poor lad sixteen years ago, and now he has money and houses and land, as well as his acknowledged and unacknowledged trades.’

Beldia sighed wearily.

‘I never liked Vestuccio myself; but I think—oh, I do think—he is truly attached to my father.’

Odisio smiled sadly.

‘My dear and innocent one, Cicero said long ago that the heart into which the love of gold has entered is shut to every other feeling; and it is as true now as it was in his time. Messer Aurelio,

believe me, is attached to no one except to himself.'

Beldia sighed again.

'But it would injure him, surely, to injure anyone so good and so much respected as my father?'

'My love, nothing injures anyone by which they gain. Men like Vestuccio do not care greatly about a pure reputation; they chiefly care about making high percentage and buying cheap to sell dear.'

Beldia was silent; her reason told her that he was right.

'We are not to go to the country,' she said, while her eyes filled with tears.

'Indeed? That looks bad. What cause does your father allege?'

‘That he has let, or lent, the house.’

‘To Vestuccio, perhaps?’

‘Perhaps. I never thought of that. I so longed to be with you at Antella.’

‘My dearest, I am happy enough here.’

Beldia said nothing, she employed herself watering her flowers from the cans which he filled at the spout on the roof. The fresh air, the evening shadows, the solace and support of her suitor’s presence calmed her apprehensions and soothed her nerves; yet she was profoundly troubled by his echo of her own apprehensions.

‘If I am to bring him, as a dower, only debt and anxiety he had better never have seen my face,’ she thought, as she stooped over her carnations.

As if he divined her thoughts he kissed her hand as he resigned to it the handle of the water-can.

‘Come weal, and come woe, my dear, we shall be happy in each other’s love; and whatever a man who is poor can do to save and serve another I will do for Ser Checchi.’

‘I am sure that you will,’ she said gratefully. ‘But it is not difficulty and trouble that I wish to bring you as my dower. What will your mother say?’

‘My mother will say that I cannot ask a fairer fate than leave to win and work for an angel,’ said Odisio with a tender smile. ‘And we may distress ourselves needlessly. Your father is, although a scholar, a man of business; and in business there are often momentary em-

barrassments which a little time and management can tide over: if it were anything exceedingly grave, I do not think he would keep you ignorant of it. At all events, to-morrow I will make inquiries and tell you the result.'

At that moment there came a rush and patter of several feet up the wooden stair leading to the roof, and Folko, with two little girls clinging to him, scrambled up on to the platform, and rushed to his mistress.

The children were Gemma and Dina, the children of Vestuccio.

'Oh, Beldia,' cried the elder, her fair hair blowing in the wind and her hands full of fern fronds and field gladiolas, 'we have just come from Antella; and I brought you these because you are not

going there ever any more, you know ; and we shall be there all the summer, and we shall ride the donkey and eat the plums and the pears. Father said we were not to tell you—but I would come and tell you, because you may come and stay with us if you like, and we will take Folko for good and all, and be very kind to him ; won't we, Folko ?' and Gemma, voluble and important, eager in her mingling of pity and patronage, of fondness and condescension, pressed her corn and her flowers on Beldia with one hand, and with the other clutched caressingly the dog's white curls.

‘Not the dog, no ; he is mine !’ said Beldia quickly ; and involuntarily she thrust the little girl, and the flowers, and

the ferns away from her, and drew close to her the white form of her four-footed friend.

‘You see!’ she murmured, in a low, startled whisper to Odisio.

The children stared at her in astonishment; they had not meant to be unkind; they were subdued and frightened at the way in which their offer had been received, and they knew that their father and mother had bidden them not speak a syllable of Antella. They began to whimper, dropping their rural treasures on the floor. They were afraid of Odisio and Beldia, standing tall and stern above them.

‘We thought you would be glad for us to let you come up there,’ they whined between their sobs; and we

would be so good to Folko, because you are going to be so poor you won't be able to give him anything to eat. He would be happier with us than with you.'

'Get you gone,' said Odisio sternly, laying his hands on their shoulders. 'You are two pert, silly, impertinent babies. Learn to hold your tongues as your parents bade you. Folko will live and die where he is, and Madamigella Beldia will not ask your permission to go where she pleases. Be off with you !'

He pushed them not gently towards the first step of the wooden stair, and crestfallen and disappointed they withdrew, leaving a litter of broken fronds and red flowers on the stones behind them.

When they were out of sight and earshot, he came back to Beldia, and taking her hands in his breast :

‘I fear—I fear—the worst,’ he said, in answer to the mute appeal of her eyes. ‘Little pitchers have long ears, and these children know that their parents have taken Antella. Let us only hope that it is some temporary arrangement which Ser Checchi has deemed it prudent to make.’

‘Were it only that, he would have told me,’ she replied. ‘It is Cirillo who has brought him to this pass.’

‘May I speak to him and entreat him to confide in me?’

‘It would be of no use. It might offend him. My father is obstinate, and would not readily admit that he had

mismanaged his affairs. We do not even know that he has mismanaged them. Misfortunes come in flocks, like swallows.'

Odisio did not attempt to alter her loyalty and unwillingness to see the truth.

'I may need her divine indulgence some day myself,' he thought.

But he was troubled more greatly than he liked to show to her.

Rumours had reached him in the neighbourhood which spoke of her father's liabilities as numerous, and the reserve in which the elder man had wrapped himself up made it difficult and dangerous to attempt to force his confidence.

'If he would sell his choicer manu-

scripts, especially the Dante?' he suggested.

Beldia shook her head with a sigh.

'He will never do that. They are the treasures of his soul.'

'Heaven send that the law do not take them from him!' thought Odisio, but he did not say so.

What use was it to add to her anxieties? She was powerless — as powerless as though she were bound by cords to the flagstaff on the roof.

She stooped for the fern leaves and gladiolas which the children of Vestuccio had left behind them on the stones.

'They came from Antella,' she said, kissing them with great emotion.

Perhaps, she thought, they were all

that she would ever see again of those breezy and fragrant fields, where she had wandered with light childish feet, and dreamed so many dreams of girlhood.

CHAPTER XI.

THE days went by, and Ser Checchi said nothing of his affairs either to her or to Odisio.

He was still more serious than was his wont, and passed many hours out of the house, ostensibly on business ; but they could not tell from his demeanour or conversation that anything was wrong with him.

His old friends and visitors were more loquacious. Especially did the old ecclesiastic, Don Gervasio, shake his head,

and say to her when he found her alone :

‘ Things are awry, sadly awry ; your good father has too much bad paper out, they do say even Antella is no longer your own ; he is always in notaries’ offices, and whoever goes thither rues it.’

But they knew nothing for certain or in detail ; they had, like her, only vague fears and imperfect suggestions to go upon ; and like herself they dared not intrude their anxieties on the only person who could have satisfied them. Ser Checchi, despite his gentleness and hospitality, had always kept his friends and companions in a little awe of him.

His manner was so much more com-

posed and serene than the impassioned gesticulations of his fellow-citizens, that its dignity imposed upon them, and there was something about him which made all men feel that he was not lightly to be meddled with or interrogated.

Even his son, who jeered and mocked at him behind his back, had never cared to meet the calm, limpid, grave gaze of his large eyes.

Of Cirillo, and of her pearls also, Beldia meanwhile heard nothing ; had it not been for the witness of the empty jewel-case, she would have thought that the events of his nocturnal visit had been a dream. ‘I will write from Livorno,’ he had said, as he had slipped the necklace into the inside pocket of his coat ;

but no letter whatsoever had come from him from anywhere.

The heat was now great, and she who had never spent the leonine month in the city since her infancy, felt the oppression and drowsiness of the long, dull, scorching days, and the nights in which scarce a leaf stirred or the faintest breeze arose. The smoke of the furnaces and gasworks, by which the banks of the Arno have been defiled, hung over the river from the San Miniato hill on the east to the avenues of poplars in the west, whilst the green water glistened with the last rays of sunset or sunrise, or the effulgence of full moon.

To her apprehensive terrors and fretting disquietude the burden of the canicular heat added a feverish oppression

which was very hard to bear ; and even midnight scarcely seemed other than, at this season, a less bright, but not less burning day. To increase her sorrow also, the office at which Odisio worked was closed for two months ; and he and she both knew that, to fulfil the conditions prescribed by her father, he must leave the city and seek labour and its gains elsewhere.

‘ Oh ! why have we not one thousandth part of all that the gamblers in the clubs and the idlers in the carriages throw away every evening ? ’ said the young man passionately one night. ‘ To think that we must be parted for want of a little of that wealth which fools and knaves roll in, as crocodiles roll in the yellow sand ! ’

‘We shall not be the happier for envying others,’ said Beldia gently. ‘Never, never did I wish for anything more than what I had until the last few weeks. Father always had enough for all real wants, and of riches I never thought for a moment.’

‘Nor I,’ answered Odisio. ‘Nor would I wish for them now. But what I fain would have is enough to never leave your side, and to be able to banish all trouble from your father’s house. He has forbidden me to think of you, until I can show him that I can maintain you fairly well. I cannot blame him. It is a just and fair demand. But oh, my love, the weariness, the cruelty of waiting !’

‘I feel it too,’ said Beldia softly,

with a sigh which pierced Odisio's heart.

They would have so greatly enjoyed this summer, had they spent it together on the fragrant hills and wind-swept woods of Antella : other summers might be granted them by a kindly fate, but this one summer was for ever lost, unenjoyed, and life is too short for such an irrevocable loss not to be mourned as sadly as the loss of dead Adonais.

When he went down the tower stairs and homeward that night, Odisio found lying in his attic a letter which had come by the evening's post. When he had read it, and one from his mother which was enclosed in it, the news contained in them startled him greatly, and caused him grave and anxious thought : the

communication was from his late master in Milan, and contained the offer to him of an appointment as architect and surveyor in Brazil. A Piedmontese banker who had gone out there in his youth, and had made there a vast fortune, desired to build himself a palace in Rio Janeiro, and an entire new quarter also in the city on a scale of great magnificence and elegance. He had invited the Milan artist, who had been a friend of his in youth, to go out and undertake the work which he wished should, as far as the exigencies of climate permitted, recall the architecture of Lombard Italy.

‘But I am too old to seek a new world,’ wrote the old architect; ‘I wish to lay my bones in the green valley by Biella where I was born, and if I went

on board ship to go Westward I should, I am sure, beg to be put on shore again before she could weigh anchor. You have heard of that poor Neapolitan contadino who saved up his little all for ten years to emigrate, and when he had reached La Plata was seized with such homesickness that he worked his passage back at once, and died of joy on seeing the Italian coast on the horizon. So would it be with me. I am too old and too homely to bear transplanting. But you are young, strong, adventurous, new climes and new friends will amuse you, and in a few years' time you will make money enough to return, if you wish, and a reputation too, if you choose. I have proposed you in my place to Don Ercole Vassilva, and this day I received

by telegraph his willing consent to employ anyone whom I recommend. He makes only one condition, that you shall go out almost immediately. The monetary conditions are written on the sheet enclosed with this. You will find them generous, and as you will be at no expense whatever whilst there, you can put by a great deal. I have spoken of it to your mother, who, though she would suffer much at having you go so far away, yet sees that it is too good a chance to lose. But she thinks there may be reasons of sentiment why you will be especially loath to leave this country now. Of course you yourself alone can decide this. Be so good, however, as to telegraph me your decision in one way or another within twenty-four

hours from your receipt of this letter ; it is a golden opportunity, and you are growing too old to be much longer a mere idle student. It is time that your name were cut on some good work in stone.'

Odisio was overwhelmed by the intelligence ; he felt as if a mountain had fallen on him and crushed him under it. Before he had known Beldia the proposals might have filled him with rapture : the novelty and excitement promised by it might have been delightful to his spirit of adventure, and he would have seen in it an opening to fame and fortune. But now the thought of wrenching himself from the side of the woman he loved, at a time when she was in sore trouble and difficulty, made the idea of

acceptance terrible to him. It would enable him, indeed, to fulfil the condition which her father had laid down to him, but at what a cost of probation and separation! The memory of the wide rolling ocean which would sever them made his heart grow sick.

A few months earlier he might have accepted such a proposal with the ardour of a man young and full of courage, and of curiosity before the unknown, although more probably he would have rejected it even then in favour of liberty and the pleasures of a wandering and careless life. But now the strings of his heart tightened with an intense yearning over his country, his mother, and the woman whom he loved, while at the same time he felt that for the sake of others he

ought in duty to utilize this great and fortuitous occasion.

‘It is for Beldia to decide,’ he said to himself, as he put the letter of his master in his coat pocket and went to the tower of Taddeo, on the following evening, when some designer’s work which he had obtained during the closing of the surveyor’s office was finished.

Before he went up on to the roof to find Beldia, he first sought her father, and told him of his temptation and his indecision.

In Italy he might spend all the years of his life, as so many clever artists do, without recognition or employment. Alone, however, he might, unrepurchased, have chosen sooner the poverty, obscurity, and idleness which

he had so long preferred; but since these would now for ever sever him from his betrothed, he was tempted to accept a temporary exile for the sake of ultimate happiness and union.

‘Do what is best for your future; do not think of me,’ wrote his mother: and he felt that Beldia would say the same. Many, even most, women are monsters of selfishness; but when a woman is capable of unselfishness, she crushes her own wishes into dust, and binds her own passions to follow her meekly, as St. Margaret bound the dragon.

He laid the letter from Milan before Ser Checchi, who read it carerully in silence twice over, and sat in silence for some moments, when the younger man had ceased to speak of all his hopes and

fears, his doubts and hesitations. At length he said gravely :

‘I would bid you go, if you ask my advice. If you love my daughter, you will return with means to pass your life beside her in peace, and to pursue your aims and your art without sordid and harassing anxieties checking you at every step. Go. This is one of those golden occasions which fortune occasionally opens out to a man, and of which he never forgives the refusal. If you reject it, you will regret the rejection all your life. Yes: I admit that I have some troubles. I told you that my daughter was poor. The times are unkind to men who have not the faculty of business. I have it not. I have always loved the impersonal. I live in an age in which

to do so is more costly than any crime. But there is no immediate pressure on me, no peril of the kind of which you think. And were there any, what could you do? You are a student; you have to work for your own bread. You would only be the pained witness of sorrows which you could not alleviate. Go and make your own career; Beldia will wait for you. She is constancy incarnated.'

The counsel was sound, the decision was wise; but they fell like stones on the heart of Odisio. He would so willingly have her father say, 'Nay, I need you; stay beside us.'

With a slow step and a sad spirit, he mounted the wooden stairs of the tower which so often had seemed to him as a

silver ladder to the stars, as a golden pathway to celestial joys. Beldia was as usual at that hour tending her herbs and plants, a rough homespun apron tied over her gown, her watering-can in her hand. She was pouring a shower of rain-water over the thirsty geraniums and pinks ; her face was colourless from the great heats, and her actions were more languid than usual : the sultry, heavy, windless air of August in the city robbed her of her customary energy and force ; it oppresses alike man and woman, child and animal, humanity and nature ; only the swallows, and the bats, and the clouds of evening moths are untouched by it, and whirl and dance and float and circle with unflagging gaiety and unslackened speed.

He went up to her, and without any words of preamble put the letter of the Milan architect in her hand :

‘ You rule my life,’ he said simply. ‘ Judge for me. What you wish I will do.’

She took the letter and read it through, sitting on the stone coping of the parapet, with the swallows and bats whirling above her head under that pale-green and clear faint gold of the sunset’s reflections.

The dangers of absence, the perils of ocean, were a hundredfold more terrible to one who had never left her native city than they can ever seem to the travelled woman of the world. Imagination and ignorance combined to swell their proportions, and to Beldia a long voyage

assumed the aspect that it wore to the women who hung in horror over the charts which served to show the mysterious zones whither their lovers, and brothers, and sons had gone with Cristoforo Colombo, or with Marco Polo.

She had lived and studied so much with the classic and mediæval writers of her father's bookshelves, that she thought as they did, feared as they did, measured the world as they did. But she resisted her terrors.

‘You must go,’ she said firmly. Her lips were colourless, and her breath was sharply drawn and uneven.

‘Are you so willing that I should leave you?’ said Odisio, with reproach and chagrin.

‘ Ah, no, God knows !’ she answered quickly. ‘ But I would not for worlds stand between you and a fair occasion—between you and your future welfare.’

‘ If I go, it is only to make that certain provision for you which your father has imposed as his condition that I shall obtain.’

‘ I know, I know,’ said Beldia softly. ‘ It is for me that you seek an assured provision. But, once there, you may forget, you may change, I may cease to have any great place in your memory ; you will grow more endeared to your ambition and your art ; and to those you will never alter ; it is of those which I would have you think first, it is this which this offer will most surely serve.’

‘ But at what a price ! Sooner would

I be the lowliest draughtsman in the meanest builder's office, than I would buy the fame of great Taddeo who put these stones together by a year's loss of you! As for change,' he added in impassioned tones, 'full well you know, my love, that I shall no more change to you than will the moon cease from her course about the earth. You have no right to say such things, not even in pretence to try me. I am not shallow or fickle or untrue. The first day I saw you by the market-place—you were standing looking down upon the flowers at the palace corner—I saw in you all I had dreamed of, all I had desired, and I said in my soul, "By the grace of God she shall be mine, or never shall any woman enter in my life."'

The tears rushed to her eyes and the colour to her face.

‘I know, I know ! I never doubted you, dear,’ she said, with deep emotion. ‘But I would not bring trouble upon you, and things are not as I thought they were when first we met ; for my father is poor—very poor.’

‘So am I.’

‘Yes. But you are young and he is old. You must not overshadow your fate with ours.’

‘I will work for you both.’

‘You have your mother to support.’

‘Nay ; she maintains herself. I am free to do what I will. If you bid me go, I go ; if you bid me stay, I stay.’

Beldia leaned her head upon her

hands, and covered her face from his gaze.

Above, the evening clouds floated in pomp and splendour ; the golden light quivered in the water below ; the night-moths drifted heavily above the heads of the late carnations, the bats circled from steeple to belfry, from flagstaff to weather-vane ; the deep toll of the Santo Spirito church chimed the hour. In that sweetness and stillness and solitude the cruelty of such a choice seemed to her greater than it would have done in the glare and business of the noon. She cared nothing for money ; she cared nothing for success ; she cared only for the humble, peaceful, simple ways of life, fragrant with innocence and imagination and learning, as a garden path which runs through shrubs

of gray lavender and bushes of odorous southernwood.

She only wished for such a home as she had hitherto had ; for such a homely and lowly happiness as had been that of women of her class in the days of old ; such a life as had led the mother of Albrecht Dürer, or the elder daughter of Galileo. For herself, she would have asked nothing better of fate than to dwell where she was until death took her ; with Odisio earning his daily bread beside her in honesty and dignity all their days.

But she believed that he had rare talents and fine learning, and that it was in him to make his name known by men. She knew that harder and darker, as every week rolled on, would grow the

wants and the woes of her own family. Had she a right to chain him here by her side only to suffer with her, only to witness what he would be powerless to alleviate, only to share what might lie on him like a stone, crush down his vital powers, and his buoyant aspirations, under the dead weight of a wearing poverty?

She knew how men quickly lose hope and grace beneath the burden of poverty; she knew how all the vigour and zest of manhood are crushed into a withering atrophy by continual struggle beneath the pressure of debt. She knew it; and she would not, for the sake of her and hers, bind him to such a fate. She lifted her face and looked at him by the warm, shadowy light of the summer evening.

‘Go, dear, go,’ she said once more.
‘I love you too well to keep you here.’

Then she rose, and of her own will,
for the first time, she kissed him.

A week later he sailed for the south-
western coast.

CHAPTER XII.

THE Borgo San Jacopo was startled one forenoon, soon after the departure of Odisio, by the passage through it of three figures, familiar indeed, but terrible to its sight as the incarnated shapes of an inexorable fate. Often and often were these three figures beheld in this poor quarter of Oltrarno, and where they passed the sun seemed blotted out, the maidens and the children ceased to laugh, the hard-working householders held their breath : they were the modern substitutes for the *Parcæ*.

The usher, as the sheriff's officer or process-server is termed in Italy, was a small, thin, ferret-faced man with sandy hair and a sharp voice, by name Luigi Fanno, and by nickname Gigi; the custode, or bailiff, who was called Giuseppe Dessi, and was known as Beppe, was short and fat, and red and jovial, making plenty of money out of his wretched trade, and as quick to take a bribe as a swallow to catch gnats. This admirable pair were accompanied by the clerk of the tribunal of the section, a youth of twenty, dark, dirty, pert, and rude, with paste rings on filthy fingers, and a tone intended to awe all hapless debtors into the belief that he held the scales of fate in his unwashed paw. These three persons, with a sheaf of papers, an ink-

horn and a Dogberry and Pistol swagger, pushed their way down the narrow street, past the bronze Bacchus, scowling at a little dog, which, in open defiance of law, was skipping and jumping about in play with a bit of string, having no medal on its throat to show that it discharged the tax demanded for its existence.

‘Mem. : Little curly dog, brown and white, seen playing on doorstep of No. 12,’ the usher wrote down in his note-book as a matter of contravention to be duly notified to the city-guards, and punished when he should have leisure for minor matters. Then he went onward with his satellites, all three dirty, ill-smelling, and ugly to look at, as they jarred on the radiant sunshine,

the masses of flowers, the bright fruits on the barrows, and the laughing faces of the people, which grew grave as they passed. At last they approached the huge arched door of the tower of Taddeo, and began to mount the stairs; it was not more than ten minutes earlier that Beldia had come down those stairs, and set forth on an errand for her father to his notary Reggiano, whose office was far off by the Porta Pinta.

‘Good-morning, gentlemen,’ said the charcoal-seller in the entrance: obsequiously removing his grimy hat, whilst honest Lillo barked, straining at the rope which tied him to his barrel. There is a general subserviency and servility to all minions of the law throughout Italy, bred in the bone and

blood of the people by many centuries of tyranny, political, ecclesiastical, and financial.

‘Good-morning, gentlemen,’ echoed the cobbler and the tailor and the cabinet-maker in the mezzanino, all with a thrill of fear; for times were bad, and any one of them knew that it might be his turn any day to receive undesired visits from these guardians of finance and order.

‘Ser Checchi in?’ asked the bailiff Beppe Dessi, with his ample paunch thrust out. He was a man who loved to talk when no speech was needed: the bailiff in this country is an amateur, created into an official *pro tempo*, being any householder or citizen whom the sheriff’s officer may like to select for the

enjoyment of this function and the receipt of the daily dole of money which the law awards to him, out of the pocket of the debtor, however empty that pocket may be.

‘Yes, gentlemen, yes,’ said the cobbler hurriedly, as he bent over his old boot and crossed himself with his awl in his hand, and muttered, ‘The Lord save him, poor creature! saved of mortal man he cannot be.’

The trio tramped on noisily up the dark stone shaft of the stair under the lamp which always burned there all the day, while the barking of Folko above responded to the barking of Lillo below.

When they reached the doorway of the library, they took off their felt hats, and wiped their foreheads, and put their

hats on again, and said to one another that it was much harder work getting up here than to climb up to the lantern of the Duomo, and bid a good morrow to a milkman who, by their bidding, had joined them there to be the witness which the law exacts.

Then they pushed the door open pompously, making the bell ring with a violent clatter, and walked into the first book-room, Gigi Fanno leading, by virtue of his superior office.

Ser Checchi was as usual seated in his large leathern chair, turning over some manuscript ; the boy Poldo was dusting in the inner room ; Veronica, above in her kitchen, was making a great clangour with her copper pans and brass pipkins ; Beldia was absent on her errand.

The old man started, as the shadows of unbidden visitors appeared between him and the sunlight of the open doorway.

He knew what their approach indicated. They never appeared together thus but on one mission alone.

He did not rise, he did not greet them; he sat looking at them in silence, very pale, very grave.

Gigi Fanno advanced into the middle of the room, and opened one of the long stamped papers which he had brought with him.

He began to read aloud the usual formula: ‘Ardiglione, Francesco, of the late Piero, domiciled in the dwelling-place known as the tower of the Branca-leone, but belonging to the most respected Tomaso Saetta, is now at the demand of

—hum—hum—hum——’ But before he could read more than this Ser Checchi stayed him with a gesture.

‘I understand,’ he said calmly, ‘you are come to level execution on my goods?’

‘Precisely,’ said the usher, offended at the interruption to his majestic eloquency, while Beppe Dessi added volubly :

‘Unless you are prepared to pay principal, interest, and costs down on the nail this morning ;’ and the milkman laughed a little nervously, and the young clerk spat on the clean floor, and winked at Poldo, who was standing on the threshold of the inner room, with his round eyes wide open and his mouth still more widely agape.

‘I cannot meet your demand,’ said Ser Checchi firmly, though his ivory white hands trembled as they held the edge of the table. Then he turned his head to the boy Poldo. ‘You may go downstairs,’ he said to him; but the usher interposed.

‘Pardon me, let the good youth remain; he may be needed as additional witness.’

The presence or absence of the boy was wholly indifferent to him, but he liked to make a debtor feel that a man who owed money could not be master any more in his own house.

Poldo stayed, curious and breathless, leaning against the doorpost, and thinking what a fine thing it was to be a tribunal clerk, with fine glass rings on

your fingers, and nobody to order you to wash your hands.

The men wasted no more words on the insolvent and, in their eyes, contemptible graybeard leaning back in his old leathern chair, and they began their business ; the first spot to which they betook themselves was the carved oak box in which the Dante was hidden, enshrined under lock and key.

‘Not that, not that!’ cried the old man, as he involuntarily threw himself between his treasure and the coarse, clutching hands of Gigi Fanno and of Dessi, as he would have thrown himself between his daughter and a violating touch. ‘Take the rest first,’ muttered Ser Checchi faintly to his tormentors.

The usher swore a filthy oath.

‘We are masters here, my old fellow,’ he answered. ‘Beppe says aright. We do not pick and choose at your bidding. We take all as the law hath a right to take it. Give me the key, quick, or I call the carabineers to force you. I suppose you have some specie or drafts hidden here?’

Ser Checchi did not reply. His face was livid, the blue veins stood out like cords. He heard the lad Poldo laugh; the young clerk laughed in answer.

‘It is a Codice: you do not understand,’ said the librarian with a cruel tremor in all his spare slight form.

‘You have no power of objection or selection,’ said Gigi Fanno contemptuously; ‘all your goods are forfeit to the

law. Quick! give me the key of the box.'

'Come, out with the key,' said Beppe Dessi pompously. 'We are the masters here, good man. A debtor is a cipher in his own house.'

Ser Checchi, without a word, took a small antique key off his watch-chain, and gave it to them.

The usher took no more notice of him than if he had not moved or spoken, but seized the key, pushed him rudely aside, and pulled the great folio out of its hiding-place in the oak brass-bound box, where Ser Checchi had laid it as tenderly as though it were the embalmed body of a king.

'Vellum, eh?' said Gigi Fanno, whilst he wetted his thumb and fore-

finger, and turned its leaves over one by one with a contemptuous gesture, as he licked his thumb afresh and dog-eared one of the beautiful fairly-written pages.

‘Look for an old manuscript of the “Divina Commedia,” which lies locked up in an oak box : it does not look like manuscript, but that is what they say it is ; it is rotten old rubbish, but a gentleman has a fancy for it whom I know,’ Aurelio Vestuccio had whispered the night before, slipping a hundred-franc note in the usher’s ready palm : they had been friends for years. Explanation is not needed between kindred spirits and bright intelligences. Many had been the object, curious or valuable, which the man of law had thus been able to seize at a low valuation, and pass

on to the auction room where Messer Aurelio knew so well how to have any precious thing knocked down, for little, to his confederates or representatives. Good-fellowship is a most useful factor in business.

‘Worth five shillings, eh? Or five pence?’ said Beppe Dessi, leaning over the noble folio with a grin, and rubbing the cabuchon carnelians with his cotton handkerchief.

‘Put ten francs,’ said the usher to the boy who wrote. ‘It’s big and will sell by weight; they boil up these old parchments, and make new writing papers out of them, all nice and clean.’

He did not want his associates to know the value which Ser Aurelio had attached to the musty folio.

Ser Checchi stood near, the veins in his pale brow swollen like blue cords; his breast heaving, his hands clenched; he suffered as a high priest who beholds his golden gods shattered, and his altar vessels defiled.

‘Old “*Divina Commedia*”—leather—value ten francs,’ wrote the young clerk at the table. ‘What comes next?’

Ser Checchi’s eyes flamed under their hollow brows, with difficulty he restrained himself from violence, and, with a gesture of infinite tenderness and reverence, he lifted the volume up from where they had cast it, dusted it with his handkerchief, as though to wipe off from it their polluting touch, and laid it back in its little chest.-

The two men and the boy gave a loud guffaw of derision, and went on with their work : it was too much trouble to enumerate the volumes and the rolls of manuscript and the unbound books one by one ; they contented themselves with writing them down by the score and the hundred, as Lot 1, Lot 2, Lot 3, dragging down the pamphlets and manuscripts from the well-ordered shelves, until all the contents of the book-shelves were thus entered on the sheets of stamped paper on which the youth wrote.

They dawdled over their work, they smoked, they cracked jokes, they spat on the floor, they splashed the ink and the sand about on the table, they tossed the volumes to one another as if they were brick-bats ; they took no more heed of

the master of them than if he had been a log of wood.

He had dropped into his chair again, and watched them silently, his nails dug into the palms of his hands in the effort which he made to restrain himself from very violence or opposition. All the order, chronological and archæological, in which the volumes had been with such loving exactitude arranged by him, was destroyed at a stroke, as the men threw them roughly on the floor, piled them together in bundles, and tied them up with string—architecture with ecclesiastical history, archæology with astrology, Benedetto of Imola with Boccaccio, the Fathers of the Church with the Songsters of the Renaissance, Poliziano with St. Gregory, a Giolito Ariosto with

the 'Nuova Antologia,' treasures from the Medicean printing press with essays of Emile Lavellye, old chap-books of the Ciompi time with pamphlets of Bonghi's and of Sella's, classics of Bernardo Cennini with the modern Cennini publications—all pell-mell, as they happened to come to their hand from the heaps into which they had thrown them.

When they had finished their labours, they dragged the Dante towards them once more, pulled it out of its box malignantly, and bound it in a packet with some newspapers, then threw it with a loud bang on the top of the parcels of the books, which strewed the ground knee-high, and filled the whole intervening space from wall to wall.

Then the usher called to Ser Checchi.

‘ Show us the other rooms. We shall lock up these.’

And he took out the keys from the locks.

Ser Checchi then arose ; his hands were trembling, and his lips were ashen pale ; but he controlled his emotion with a mighty effort, and spoke with courtesy and mildness.

‘ Gentlemen, you have done what you deemed right, no doubt, and no more than the law allows you ; but you have undone all the labours of my life, and I perceive that of books you have no knowledge whatever. If you must, to appease my creditors, sell these volumes, I would not oppose a just sale, but there should be previously judgment of them by those competent of such matters.

Volumes full of learning and of antiquity must not be dealt with as though they were the common rubbish of a railway bookstall. There are here specimens of the earliest typographers of the city, which possess claims on all scholars which you cannot comprehend, and would bring high prices from all humanists. These volumes are my all. They are some of them unique, and many of them rare ; all—all—all of some value. And you rob me of the last thing I have, when you propose to barter them as mere waste-paper. Nay, you rob not me alone, but all true scholars. There are works here of priceless import to all educated men.'

He spoke firmly, though in a faint, low voice, leaning his hand upon the

table to hold himself erect. Gigi Fanno listened, jingling the keys impatiently ; Beppe Dessi as he drained a flask of wine ; the young clerk with his pen behind his ear and a grin upon his mouth. When he had ceased they moved towards the door.

‘Go out, sir,’ said Fanno roughly to him. ‘We lock up the room, as you know.’

That was the only answer they gave to him.

‘Lock up my books ! Lock me away from my books !’

‘Lock you out, certainly,’ said Dessi, with a jovial laugh. ‘They are yours no longer, good Ser Checchi, and I am responsible for them to your creditors and the tribunal.’

Ser Checchi looked at him, and from him to the ferret-face of the usher, and to the broad, grinning countenance of the clerk. He saw no mercy, no pity, no respect, in any one of them. He was in their eyes only an insolvent debtor, and a madman likewise—a poor aged fool, old and daft, like Lear.

He understood that he was this, and no more than this, in their eyes, and that help from them he would get none.

He turned from the door, and seated himself in his own large leathern chair.

‘I remain amongst what hath long been my own, if it be mine no more. Go you and do what you deem your duty. You will find naught missing when you return.’

The men ceased to laugh, and stood irresolute about the doorway of the room. There was that in his tone which awed them.

He had raised the Dante from the floor and undone its cords, and laid it on his knee.

No fallen monarch, seated amidst the ashes of his burned palace, could have had more dignity than he, as he sat thus, mute and still amongst the havoc of his books.

CHAPTER XIII.

‘WILL you trust him?’ whispered Gigi Fanno to Beppe Dessi.

Dessi pursed up his mouth dubiously.

‘Eh?—well—yes. He can’t eat them, and he can’t drink them, and if he make away with one of them we can clap him in gaol. Yes; we will chance it. I can come every day, and ’tis but for fifteen days all told.’

‘Well, it is your right that you waive, and your risk that you run, not mine. So be it,’ said Fanno, and the three men

went out, and down the staircase, to refresh their bodies with fried meats and artichokes at an eating-house near, intending to return in the afternoon to continue their good work.

But at the threshold of the great entrance-door they met Beldia returning from her errand to the notary, and her purchase of such plain, poor food as she could now afford to buy. She recognised them in terror.

‘ You came hither in my absence ?’

‘ To seize his books in execution of the sentence promulgated by the most worshipful the Pretore of the section of Santo Spirito——’ began the usher.

But Beldia stopped him with a cry of horror.

‘ His books ! Even his books are not

sacred ? Oh, it is monstrous, it is infamous ! Are you Christian men ? Have you human hearts in your breasts ? Take his books from him !—and in my absence ?’

‘ The law does not wait for the absence or presence of anybody,’ answered Gigi Fanno with importance.

‘ Not even for yours, madamigella !’ added Dessi with a leer. ‘ But we are coming back in the afternoon to finish the inventory, and if you like to be with us, I for one shall be mighty pleased, for a handsome woman——’

‘ What inventory ?’ asked Beldia.

‘ We are not bound to give explanations,’ said the usher impatiently. ‘ Nevertheless, since perhaps you can persuade your father to recognise the

straits in which he puts himself, I will read you the terms of the Precetto.'

He took out of his pocket a copy of the document which he had left with Ser Checchi.

'At the demand of,' etc., etc., etc., he began, reading aloud the preamble in pompous, stentorian tones, bringing about them the idlers in the street, and the grinning children who were playing near with a wooden disc.

'Enough, enough, I understand,' she said hurriedly. 'The names are the names of others, but the real mover herein is Vestuccio.'

'Signor Vestuccio? Ser' Rello!' repeated the man in apparently scandalized amazement. 'There is not the very smallest shadow of right to bring that

most worthy and excellent citizen into this matter. His claims do not appear here. He desires in his own matter to use the uttermost leniency and patience.'

'He hides his wickedness behind the masks of others.'

'Oh, signorina, pardon me, that is a shameful charge !' said Gigi Fanno, putting back the document into his coat pocket. 'Much may be excused to your distress, but calumnious inventions are always punishable by the law. Of that I warn you, and I can tell you farther that there is not in the whole city a citizen so intelligent, so upright, and so admirable in all his relations as is Signor Vestuccio.'

'Your old man upstairs is only fit for

a madhouse,' said Beppe Dessi in his turn. 'But we have strained a point to do him a kindness. We have left him amongst his books; though, had we done our duty, we should have brought the keys away, and shut him on the wrong side of the door.'

Impatient of more delay, Gigi Fanno elbowed her off the doorstep, and, cocking his hat on one side of his head, he went away to his fry and his artichokes.

'Never mind, my pretty; I'll show you a way to get over it,' whispered Dessi, thrusting his red round face close to hers. She drew back with such undisguised disgust and repulsion that even his slow and coarse mind could not mistake them.

'Damn your pride, my penniless

madam !' he muttered as he joined his colleague. ' You'll come cringing to us on your bare bones before we've done with you.'

She went upstairs to her father, and sat on the stone floor at his feet, and embraced his knees silently in a passion of sympathy, to which she could give no adequate expression.

He said nothing. He held the Dante folio in his hands, and gazed down on it with a vacant look in his fine luminous eyes, always until now so radiantly lighted with the lambent flame of high intelligence.

' Father,' she said timidly after awhile, and with great deference and tenderness, ' pray do not shut me out of your confidence. I am not a child, nor am I a

woman of voluble tongue, that you should fear to trust me. I see these terrible papers from the tribunal come every week : I know what they must mean, although I have not read any one of them. There are rumours that Antella is sold, and I know nothing. Yet I hear that the books even may soon be sold, and that they are already seized. I ask you, is it true ? Give me at least the right to deny these calumnies in your name, or tell me the truth, and spare me the indignity of hearing it from the mouths of gossips, and being compelled to confess to them that I am an exile from my father's heart, and less acquainted with his position than the very sweepers in the streets. Time and again, in your absence, those law-papers have

been brought to me, and I could have read them and learned all their meaning, whether you willed it or no ; but I did not do so. I deserve some pity and some trust.'

She spoke with great emotion, but with great dignity and simplicity. The tone of her words, rather than the words themselves, carried conviction of their justice to her father's mind, and filled him with repentance and relenting.

Slow tears rose to his eyes and fell down his pale cheeks. He stretched his hand out to her, and drew her to his chair.

' You have deserved all good from me, and you get but ill,' he said in a broken voice. ' I will tell you of my misery if it will make it to you, who will be forced

to share it, less bitter. I have been a blind, weak, credulous fool. I am ruined. And—and—yea, the cup is draining to the dregs!—the books must go!’

Then for the first time in his life he leaned his forehead on his hands and wept.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN the early afternoon the trio of the tribunal returned, and pursued their work. They were more rough, more rude, more hasty, and more sullen, for they had in the interval drunk a good deal of wine, and wine makes most men ill-tempered rather than jovial; they came into the chambers with noise and pomp, and called coarsely to Beldia to aid them, and show them where the linen was kept, and the china, and the hardware. She did not move.

‘There is nothing hidden,’ she replied calmly. ‘You have eyes; use them.’

‘You are bound to assist the law!’ screamed the usher, thumping his hand down on an old brass-bound *escritoire*. ‘Bring out all your keys, or I summon the carabineers to enforce my right.’

She rose, knowing that her father would not be benefited by any brawl or disturbance, and fetched the keys and laid them down beside *Gigi Fanno*.

He took them up savagely, and tossed them to his colleague *Dessi*.

‘Make her show you which is which,’ he said to his coadjutor, ‘or we shall never get through all this work by nightfall.’

‘Come, my girl,’ said *Beppe Dessi*

insolently, ‘Get up and show us which is which of all these keys, and maybe, if you are pretty behaved, we will let you take out some finery and trinket of your own and hide it.’

But she did not stir. She might have been deaf and dumb for any reply which they could obtain from her. They tried the keys, one after another, for themselves, and set the doors and drawers of every bureau and chest and cupboard and closet in the rooms wide open.

Then began a havoc such as to an orderly and careful housekeeper like herself would have been at any time torture, even without the shame which it now brought with it to her.

They ransacked the place, as soldiers

do in a sacked city in search of plunder. They dragged everything out from its resting-place, and held everything up to the light, and chuckled and grumbled, and scoffed and swore ; appraising all the objects at miserable prices, and setting the young clerk to catalogue them at their estimate. All the fair linen made and marked by her mother's hands, with its odour of dried lavender and ground orris-root, was held up and pulled about by their dirty fingers. The old solid silver plate, with its date of 1620, was weighed and rubbed, and jeered at and thrown together in a drawer. The old pottery, some of Gubbio and Casteldurante, was grinned at, and pushed together on shelves, and written down as common earthenware.

The flowered pot which Vestuccio had eyed on the dinner-table, enviously, months before, was first of all secured and shut up in a wardrobe. The iris-root and orange petals, laid up with the wearing apparel to keep out moths, were shaken out upon the floors, and every article made the object of coarse gibe and jest.

They dawdled their errand out over four long hours; and lighted candles, and poked them into dark corners and empty closets to see that there was nothing hidden there. Then, leaving some places vacant, and others over-filled, they locked up the latter, and pocketed the keys, and sat all three at a table conning over the lists which they had made.

‘Verify and sign them,’ they said to Beldia.

She did not answer.

They went into the inner book-room and bade her father rise, and come and sign. He took no notice of them. Made furious by such disobedience, they ordered the boy Poldo to do so, and Poldo, shame-faced and frightened, yet very important, exchanging grins and winks with the young tribunal clerk, came up to the table and scrawled his name in witness to the inventories and acts of seizure, as the law in its sapience required that someone present in the house should do.

All was disorder, nakedness, and discomfort : their tobacco was spilled upon the floor, their ink upon the table ; the

old familiar household things were locked away from their owners, two or three necessary objects were alone left out for daily use, and the empty cupboards—of which the doors stood open—looked like graves; they were indeed the graves of peace, of credit, of all simple peace and of all honest joys.

She roused herself to make a cup of coffee for her father, and poured a little brandy in it, and took it to him with a roll. To please her he tried to take it, but his throat refused to swallow; the slow, salt tears of age were rolling down his cheeks; he was cold, and trembled with the nervous shiver of intense emotion long repressed.

Folko came and laid his head on his master's feet.

The candles which the men had lighted shed a faint flickering light over the rooms.

The boy Poldo, seeing that he was unwatched, slipped down the stairs and into the street, and narrated to his comrades a wonderful tale of how the officers of the tribunal had selected him as witness to their *verbale*, a tale told with many inventions to the glorification of himself.

‘I can be a writer at the tribunal to-morrow if I wish,’ said Poldo, very vain-glorious and self-admiring, whilst he chucked a halfpenny in the air, to see whether he or his friends should stand a treat of vermuth at the drinking shop opposite with the green bough above its door.

At last she knew as much as her father knew himself of his losses, of his liabilities, of his utter and irretrievable ruin.

Although her own fears and the words of others had in so large a measure prepared her for the worst, yet the truth came to her with a terrible shock as of some disgrace wholly incredible and unsuspected. Although she had perceived that much was wrong and much was ominous, yet the profound faith which she had always had from infancy in his wisdom, and the habit ingrained in her of never permitting herself to judge or criticise him, had made her persuade herself that it could be only some mere passing embarrassment which had been

brought about by her brother's extravagance. But now that she realized the full extent, the irreparable nature, of these calamities, she could no longer strive to think that her parent was blameless, or their situation easy to mend.

Their resources were stopped short, their revenue from their farm was cut off; the slight trade ever done in the book rooms had ceased entirely, for customers will not go where the demon of liquidation has shown its grim and grinning head; the cupboards and desks and bureaus were all locked up, and the keys borne away by the bailiff.

She saw quite well how he had been brought to his plight by carelessness, by over-confidence in himself and others,

by that absence of mind which is so often the accompaniment of intellectual devotion to an ideal or an art, and by that habit of reserve which, whilst admirable in its origin, is so frequently fatal in its results, shutting out those whom it isolates from the counsel and from the guidance of others. An immense pity for him took the vacated place of her perished trust, and she was almost insensible of the material losses and injuries to herself brought on her by his weakness, so entirely was she absorbed in her unselfish sorrow for him and in compassion for his poignant self-reproach.

‘Oh, the cruelty of Cirillo!’ she thought: had only Cirillo been that which he should have been, all these

calamities would never have befallen them. He would have had ways, and means, and knowledge, which to her, a woman, obedient and ignorant, it had been impossible to possess ; or, possessing, it would have been impossible to use.

For the first time since Odisio's departure she rejoiced that he was gone : he could have done no good, and it would have wrung his soul to have witnessed what it would have been out of his power to alter. For the ruin of her father seemed to her complete beyond any possibility of help.

Nothing which she could do to save her father was of any avail. Without money, and much money, there was no means of obtaining release or delay.

There was the feeling abroad that the sooner the sales took place the better would it be for the creditors; and when such an impression as this is created, it were easier to stop the incoming tides of the sea than the insistence of those who have the power to insist.

She had at intervals tender and grave letters from Odisio's old mother in Brescia; and she answered them with gratitude and humility, but she feared that her replies might seem constrained and reserved to their recipient; for she could not bring herself to tell of her father's afflictions, and the reticence involved weighed on her frank and candid spirit.

Yet how could she reveal these

sordid and vulgar calamities? They seemed to taint her with their own coarseness; how could she say to Odisio's mother, 'We are in misery, and soon shall starve,' without seeming to beg from her, without seeming to be a mere common scheming suppliant, unworthy of her son's troth? No, never, never, she thought, would she hint a word of their necessities to this unknown woman in Lombardy; sooner would she die for want of bread. Moreover, Odisio had often said that his mother had nothing but the little annuity which he had purchased for her, and her small house beside the Broletto.

It would but add to the distress and anxiety caused her by his absence, were she to know that the maiden to whom

he was betrothed was travailing under the coarse and foul cares of indigence and debt. 'We may never meet in life,' thought Beldia; 'but, at least, she shall always think of me as what he has portrayed.'

She suffered keenly from the absence and the silence of her betrothed; and the material troubles which beset her were almost, in a sense, of service to her by distracting her from the visions and apprehensions which were for ever in her mind with regard to his fate.

Creditors are only patient if patience seems to them to be in their own interests, and it was not their interest here. Behind the scenes, Querci, and the other lawyers who served Vestuccio, were daily

pressing for immediate sale, and setting afloat the rumour that only those who acted quickly would get any share of the proceeds.

Italian law is sharp and sudden when it deals with debtors; for assassins and other criminals it will creep gently and considerately by devious ways which leave the offender many a loophole of escape, but the debtor is a more abhorred and intolerate culprit; he is dealt with in a summary fashion, and has no escape, unless, indeed, he be indebted on a fine large scale, and has ruined a million or so of people, when the law will extend to him the indulgence it shows to the murderer.

With a protested bill judgment against the acceptor is immediate; in five days

execution is put in, and in ten more the sale takes place, unless the full amount, with heavy costs, be paid.

Ser Checchi, as a tradesman, had, of course, always known the state of the law and the penalty attached to dishonoured paper; but he was absent of mind, sanguine and yet timid, and had been too much inclined to trust all things to chance.

The sentences and the seizures had followed one on another with lightning-like rapidity, and had found him wholly unprepared to meet them. On legal grounds there was no resistance possible; his signatures were there, and he acknowledged them: there was no plea of opposition which he could lay before a lawyer; there was nothing to be done

but to submit to execution, or pay the amounts.

He could no more pay them than he could have paid the vast deficit in the National Treasury. An old comrade, the Notary Reggiani, shook his head and groaned when he saw the documents.

‘I cannot take up your case, because there is no ground in it to go upon,’ he said; ‘you have not honoured your signature to these bills, and your mortgagees were allowed to foreclose. What is there to say? Your pursuants, indeed, may be brutal and cunning, but they are wholly within the law. The law will not accept as an excuse that your wits were wool-gathering over commentaries and early editions, and so

did not remember or perceive your liabilities.'

Other than this no lawyer would say ; and there was reluctance in all the legal offices to accept the affairs of a man who admitted that he had no capital left, and showed that, as they considered, he had no capacity either. All the young advocates, who had come to the library so often on literary errands, shook their heads, and shut their office doors.

As for Pampilio Querci, he had accepted the landlord Saetta's affairs, and acted as that worthy's representative. A fledgling lawyer, who intends to be a counsellor and a deputy in due time, is not to be rejected in his suit by a maiden, without making her suffer for such want of appreciation. Querci was hand-in-

glove with Vestuccio, and gave him much adroit assistance and advice, both officially and *ex cathedrâ*.

Rising men have a bond of sympathy between them; they climb in turn upon each other's shoulders. Old men, who are disappearing and decaying, are only in their sight as sapless and leafless trees, which cumber the ground, and are best cut down ere they fall of themselves.

Uselessly, and with touching dignity in his humiliating martyrdom, Ser Checchi went to office after office, and spoke to this man and the other, whom he had benefited with his learning and the loan of his books. One and all turned their backs on him—some with a show of courtesy and regret; some not even caring to assume so much decency as

that ; some bidding him bluntly not take up their time.

He knew what his beloved Dante had known, how bitter it is to climb the stairs of others, to beg in vain for redress and justice ; and, if he had not yet known how hard it is to eat the bread of others, he felt that it would not be long before he did so.

For actual want was close at his door.

Had they been willing to sell or pawn anything, they could not have done so without being treated as criminals ; they had lost all right over their own possessions. Every other day the bailiff looked in, and walked about, and lit his pipe, and patted this object, and peered at this article and that, by way of earning

the liberal fees with which his procreator, the law, endowed him. He wanted to be bribed into staying away, but this Beldia did not know, and, had she known it, had no means wherewith to bribe him; and he, in vengeance, annoyed her as much as his position permitted—spat on her clean floors, sat and smoked on the edge of her bed, cut coarse jokes at her distress, and went to sleep in her father's own chair. Human nature, when it is hungry for a bribe and gets it not, is as a froward suckling denied its nurse's breast.

The serenity and self-restraint which were her habit only made her suffer more; if she could have screamed and raved and torn her hair, as the women of her quarter would have done in similar

circumstances, she would have suffered far less than she suffered silently in beholding the coarse and dirty figure of old Dessi pattering amongst her lavender-scented linen, or standing against the light amongst the neglected herbs and flowers of her garden on the roof.

‘A proud-stomached hussy!’ said Dessi to himself. ‘How dare anybody be proud,’ he thought, ‘when he had the keys of their chests in his own desk at home?’

The world was divided into two races, in his opinion. There were the people who seized goods, and there were the people whose goods were seized. All his homage was given to the former; the latter he regarded as the ferret regards the rabbit. The ferret lives by the rabbit,

indeed, but its scorn for the rabbit is boundless.

‘We are human, if we are ruined,’ a poor woman, whose bed had been sold from under her, had said once to him and his colleagues; and Dessi had cocked up his snub nose in the air.

‘Ay, ay, ye’re human,’ he had answered, ‘as a skinned eel in the frying-pan is still an eel.’

And the hard-hearted joke had wounded the poor woman more than the cold brick-floor on which her ill-covered bones were forced to lie.

Beppe Dessi had it in his power, by his mere presence, his mere interference, his mere legalized espionage, to torture the spirit of Beldia, as St. Agnes was tortured by the eyes and hands of the

gaoler who bared her virgin breasts for the steel of the shears. Everything about her seemed sullied and profaned. Nothing seemed her own any more. The privacy of life was ended; her home was as public as the street.

Her father scarcely seemed to notice what was done. He had sunk into an apathy from which he was only roused at rare intervals.

The scholar, with his mind far away amongst the beauties and mysteries of the past, and lost in the impersonal and delightful meditations with which an old chronicle or a new reading of an obscure text filled him, had heeded too little the things of daily life, been too thankful to escape from their sordid cares and wearing pressure, and had fallen an easy prey

to the sophisms and temptations of a shrewd and soft-spoken man of business.

‘Antella must go,’ Ser Checchi had thought often, with a cruel pang; but he had never dreamed that, Antella wholly lost to him, he would remain still in the same sad plight, still abandoned face to face with debts incurred he could not have said how.

Ever since he had yielded to Vestuccio in accepting aid for the purchase of the rare Codex of Giogoli, he had pursued a downward path, and he had never known in plain figures what he was engaged to pay. A bill, in skilful hands, with its renewals, interest, compound interest, and all its attendant obligations, grows like the beanstalk of fable, and fastens its

suckers as securely as the cuttlefish. Ser Checchi, besides great absence of mind, had a tender and proud heart; he had shrunk from telling his troubles to his daughter and his friends, and it had been insupportable to him to make his household feel pecuniary strain or suffer the harshness of personal want.

He would now have sold his library by private contract or by voluntary auction had his creditors allowed him to do so, but they would not consent. In vain he strove to persuade them and their attorneys that such a course, by enabling the books to be sold at their proper value, would bring in twice, thrice, probably ten or twenty times as much money as if they were sold by the order of the tribunal. He knew well how the

latter sales were controlled by the official and habitual frequenters of them, so that the finest work of art or literature can be knocked down as so much mere canvas or paper.

Sold to amateurs and experts, his library, which was in many ways quaint and rare, would almost certainly have brought in much more than he owed. With the salt tears in his eyes, he besought his persecutors to agree together and let him do this ; his heart would be wrung to part from his treasures, but, at least, when dispersed, they would thus find asylum on the shelves of those who could appreciate and care for them, whilst, if they went by auction by order of the sheriff's officer, they would in all likelihood be bought by weight, and in

bundles to line butter-tubs or travellers' trunks.

Oftentimes at such law-enforced sales, in lonely villages or on secluded hill-sides, he had seen ancient objects of rare workmanship, chairs, settles, chests, copper vessels, iron work, pottery, porcelain, knocked down at the sound of the horn for a few copper pieces or a single silver bit. Thus, in early days, he had himself bought several of his volumes at such sales ; though he had always, in pity and in honour, sought out the poor owner thus sacrificed to the teeth and claws of the law, and paid to him secretly the balance of what he had considered the due value of such purchases. But the measure which Ser Checchi gave, no one gave to him.

His entreaties were of no avail; he had waited too long. He had, in the innocent egotism of the bibliophile, shrunk from the mere thought of such a voluntary sale when he had been still at liberty to make it. Now he was no longer free to do so. The Codice and all the other valuable works were seized promiscuously, amongst the worthless ones, by distraint. And his creditors were too jealous of one another to consent to what might have been of profit to them all. True, had Vestuccio advised such a conciliatory course, and one so advantageous to the debtor, they might have been persuaded to unite and permit it to be followed. But Vestuccio publicly said, with frank surprise, ‘Nay, I am not in this matter; I have nothing

to do with it, thank God I have not ; my heart would be too tender to rob the poor old silly scholar of his all.' And privately to those persons, his instruments, to whom he had passed on Ser Checchi's signatures, he whispered : 'It would not be prudent to allow a voluntary sale ; to do so, all the acts must be dropped, all the sentences annulled. Personally, I would do anything in my power to help the old gentleman, but I could not, in conscience and honour, counsel you to throw away all the advantage you have gained by the verdicts of the Pretura ; his books alone might sell for much, or they might sell for nothing, whereas, if all the goods are sold as well, it is impossible that there should not be realized at least

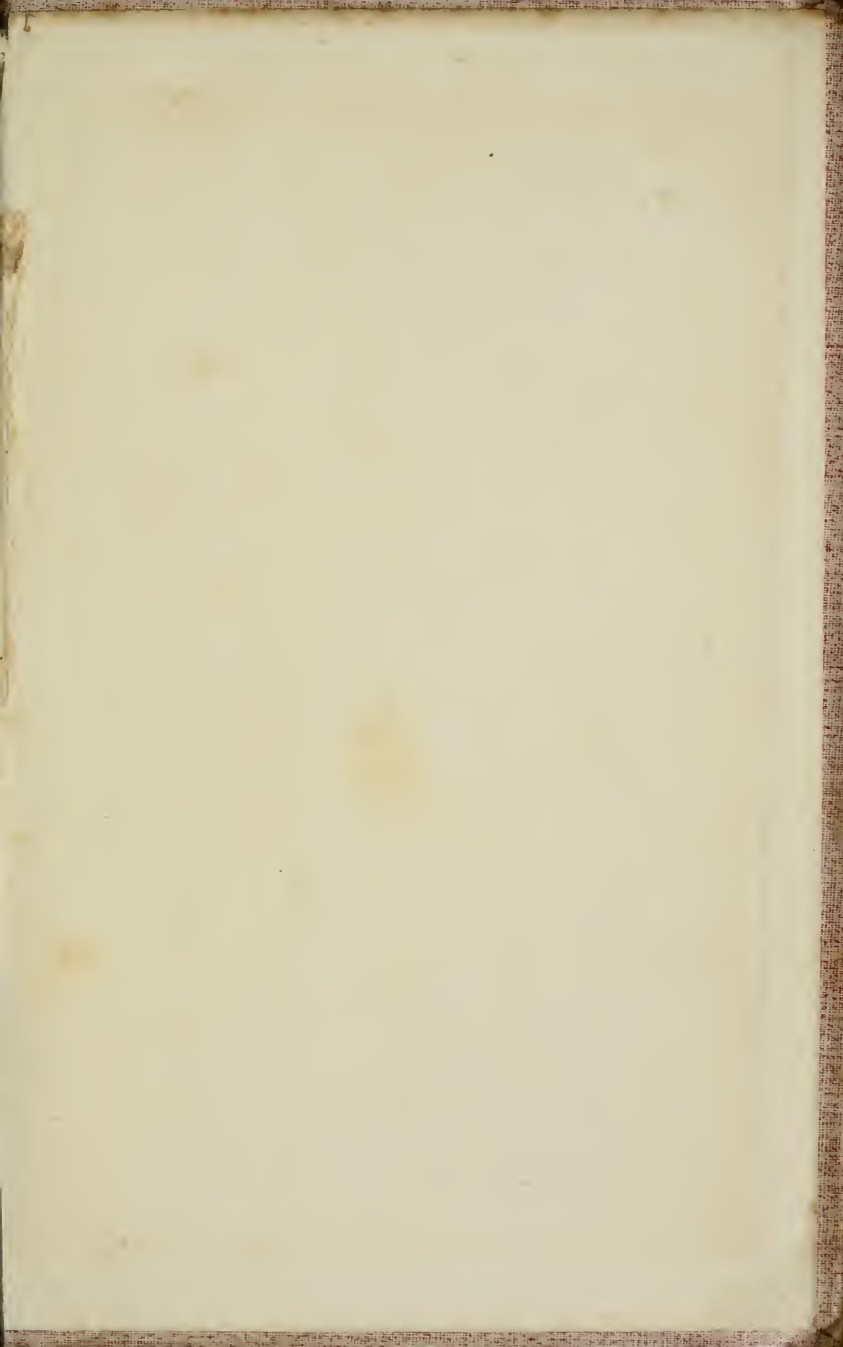
some fifty per cent. of what he owes. Besides, to agree to what he wishes, you must all be of accord, and when are a group of creditors ever all of accord? Were his affairs in my hands alone, I could have arranged, I could still arrange them; but where there are many opposing creditors, a charitable combination is impossible.'

'Impossible,' added Pampilio Querci.

How was it that there were so many creditors? Ser Checchi could not understand this; he had thought that he had dealt solely with Vestuccio, and although he had put his signature to drafts drawn up in other persons' names, he had been assured that these bills would lie safely and unseen in Vestuccio's desk, and had imagined in his

innocence that the mortgage given by him on the land of Antella would cover all these loans. After all, the sums were very small, and had he earlier had the courage to sell his rarer folios and earlier editions to foreign buyers with some little sacrifice, they could have been met and covered. But it had been no part of Vestuccio's interests to allow his victim to clearly comprehend his own position, and he had let him float on in uncertainty and indecision until it had become too late to take any decided step to struggle out of the meshes into which he had sunk.

END OF VOL. II.



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